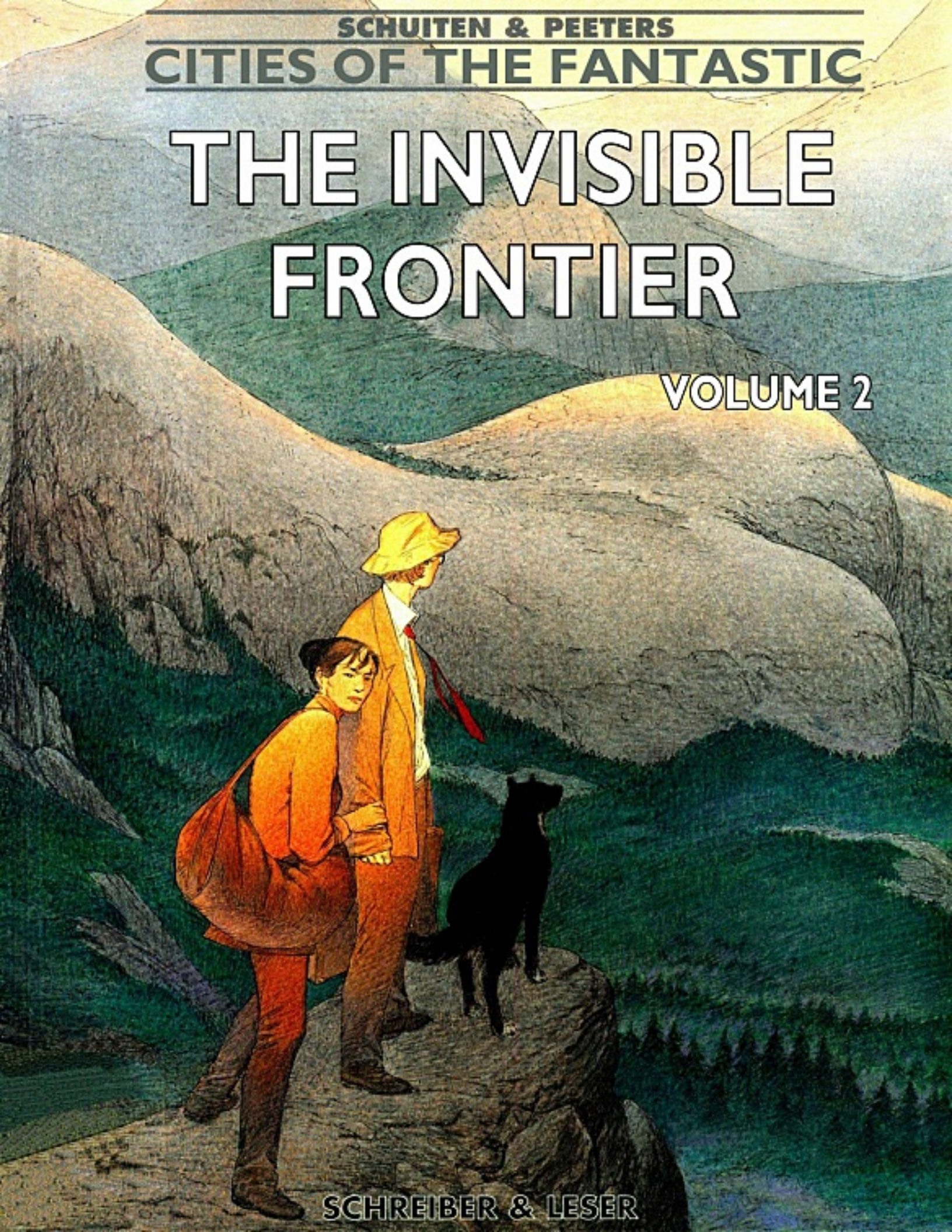
SCHUITEN & PEETERS

CITIES OF THE FANTASTIC

THE INVISIBLE FRONTIER

VOLUME 2



SCHREIBER & LESER

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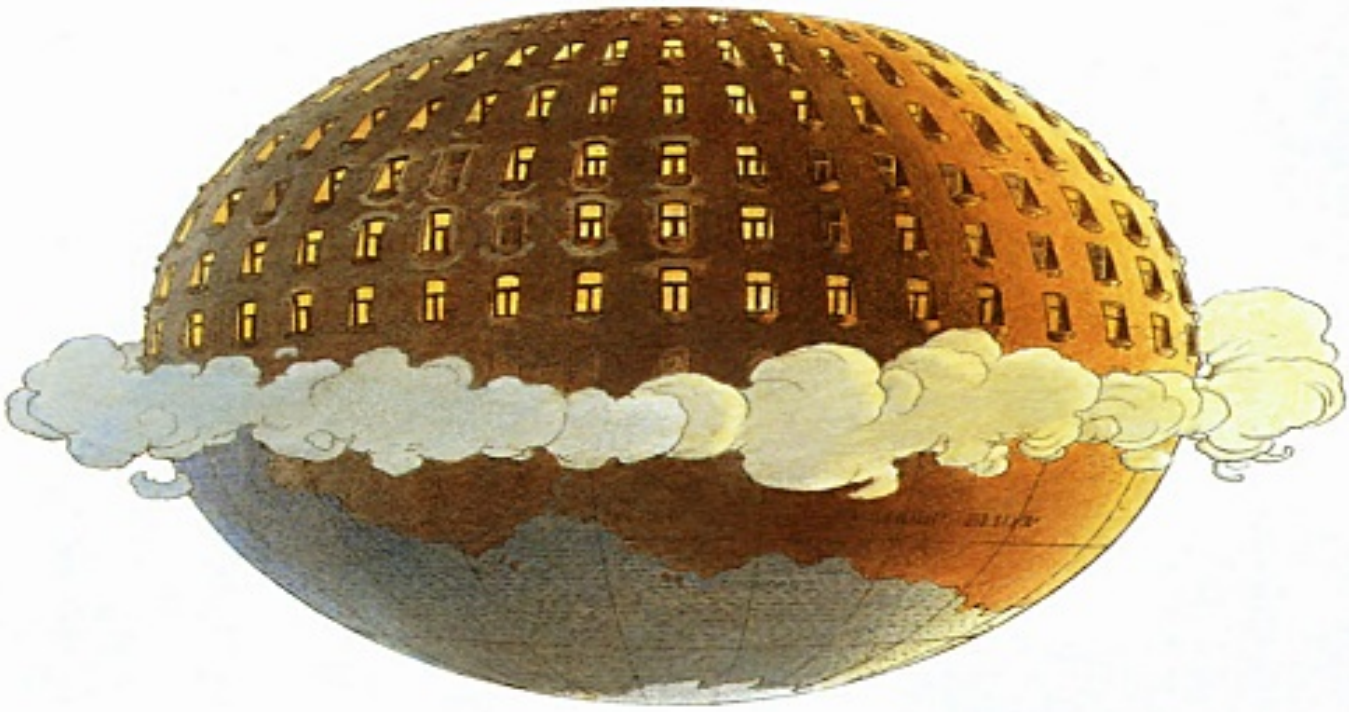

SCHREIBER & LESER

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31 OCTOBER 761. I'M NOT UNHAPPY TO BE RETURNING.

THESE THREE WEEKS OF VACATION HAVE SEEMED ENDLESS TO ME.

FRANKLY, I'D HAVE DONE BETTER NOT TO HAVE LEFT THE CARTOGRAPHIC CENTRE.

MY PARENTS DON'T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING. IT'S AS THOUGH THEY STILL TAKE ME FOR A CHILD.

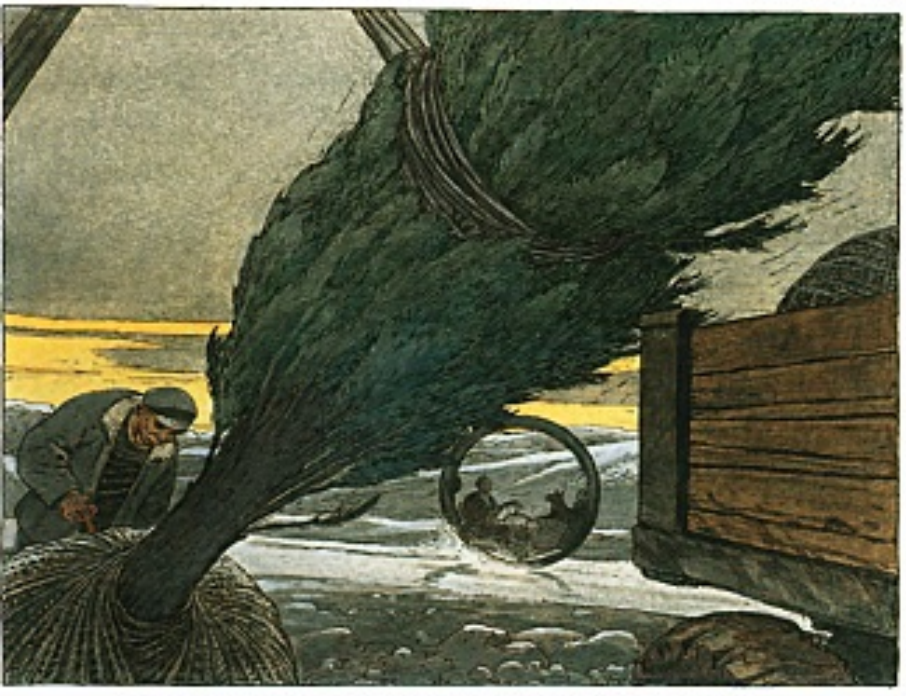
ALL THOSE SPEECHES ABOUT OUR NAME, THE "GREAT LINEAGE OF THE DE CREMERS," THE ALLIANCES THAT IT MIGHT CREATE...

AND THAT GIRL THEY INTRODUCED ME TO! IF THEY THINK I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THEIR INTENT!

TO THINK OF THE YEARS I'VE SPENT WITH THEM AND NOW THEY SEEM LIKE STRANGERS TO ME.

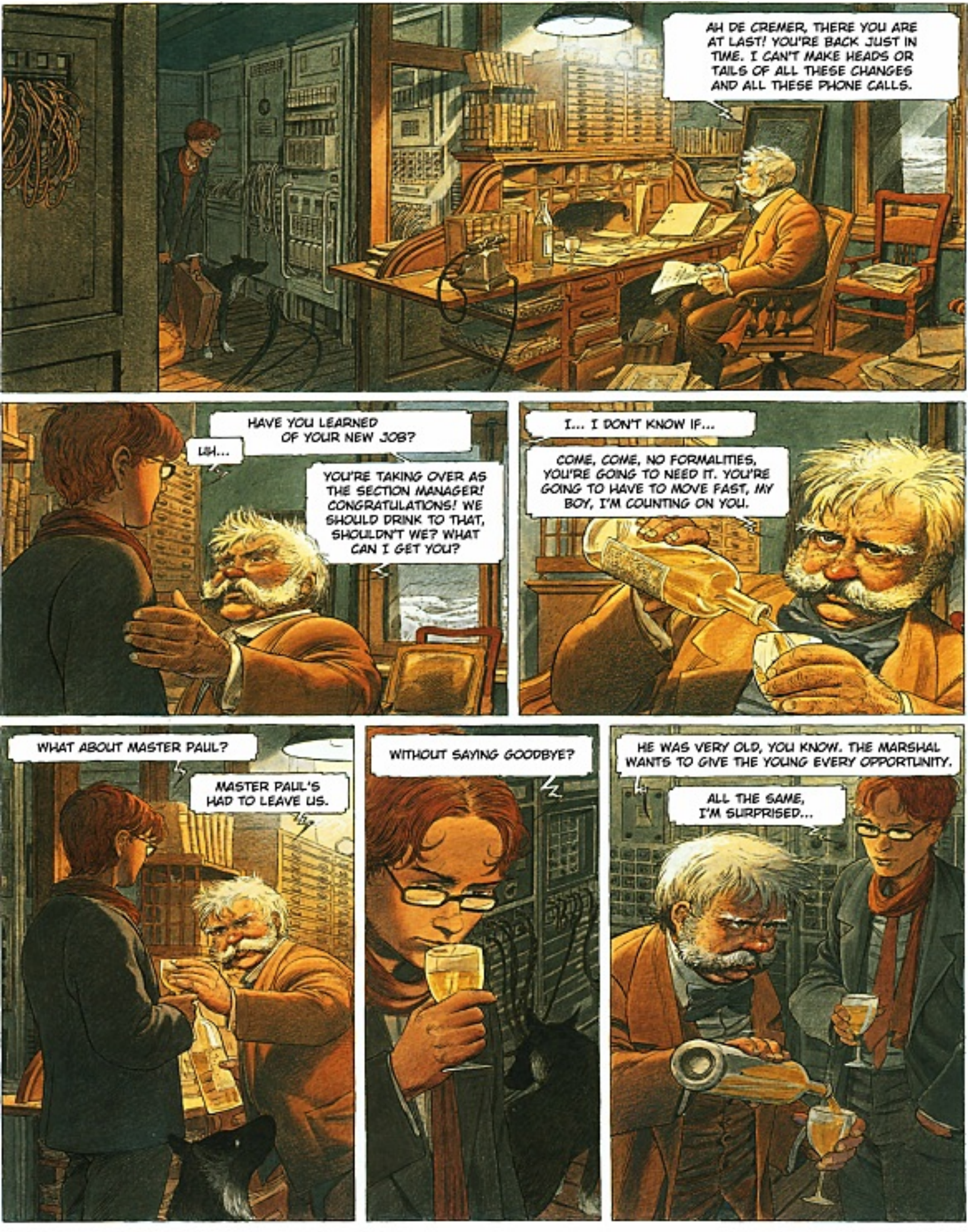
ANYHOW, THINGS HAVE CHANGED QUITE A BIT, IT WOULD SEEM.

MISTER PAUL MAY WELL CRITICISE THE MARSHAL, BUT YOU HAVE TO ADMIT THAT HE'S TAKEN THINGS WELL IN HAND. IT WAS HIGH TIME.



THE APPROACH TO THE CENTRE WAS TRULY DEPLORABLE.

SO MANY CHANGES IN A FEW WEEKS! IT'S ALMOST UNBELIEVABLE!

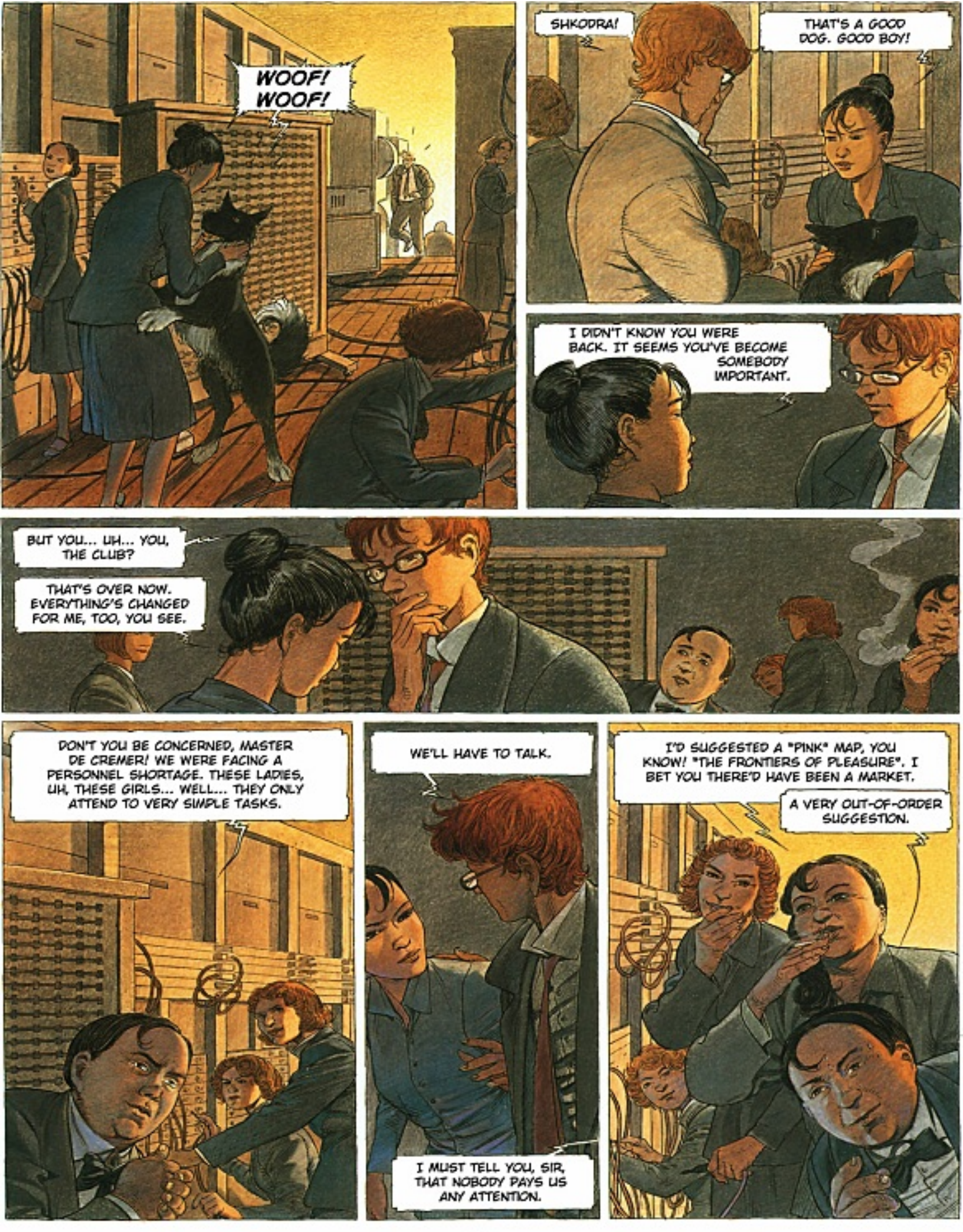

AH DE CREMER, THERE YOU ARE AT LAST! YOU'RE BACK JUST IN TIME. I CAN'T MAKE HEADS OR TAILS OF ALL THESE CHANGES AND ALL THESE PHONE CALLS.
HAVE YOU LEARNED OF YOUR NEW JOB?
UH...
YOU'RE TAKING OVER AS THE SECTION MANAGER! CONGRATULATIONS! WE SHOULD DRINK TO THAT, SHOULDN'T WE? WHAT CAN I GET YOU?
I... I DON'T KNOW IF...
COME, COME, NO FORMALITIES, YOU'RE GOING TO NEED IT. YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO MOVE FAST, MY BOY, I'M COUNTING ON YOU.
WHAT ABOUT MASTER PAUL?
MASTER PAUL'S HAD TO LEAVE US.
WITHOUT SAYING GOODBYE?
HE WAS VERY OLD, YOU KNOW. THE MARSHAL WANTS TO GIVE THE YOUNG EVERY OPPORTUNITY.
ALL THE SAME, I'M SURPRISED...

DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE PAST! WE HAVE GREAT FAITH IN YOU, DE CREMER. IF YOU DON'T LET US DOWN, A GREAT FUTURE AWAITS YOU. BUT FOR NOW, WE NEED RESULTS, OTHERWISE WE'RE ALL DONE FOR!
WHAT A NIGHTMARE! YOU SAW WHAT THEY'VE DONE TO MY OFFICE. MASTER DJUNOV PROMISED US THAT STANDARDISATION WOULD SAVE US.

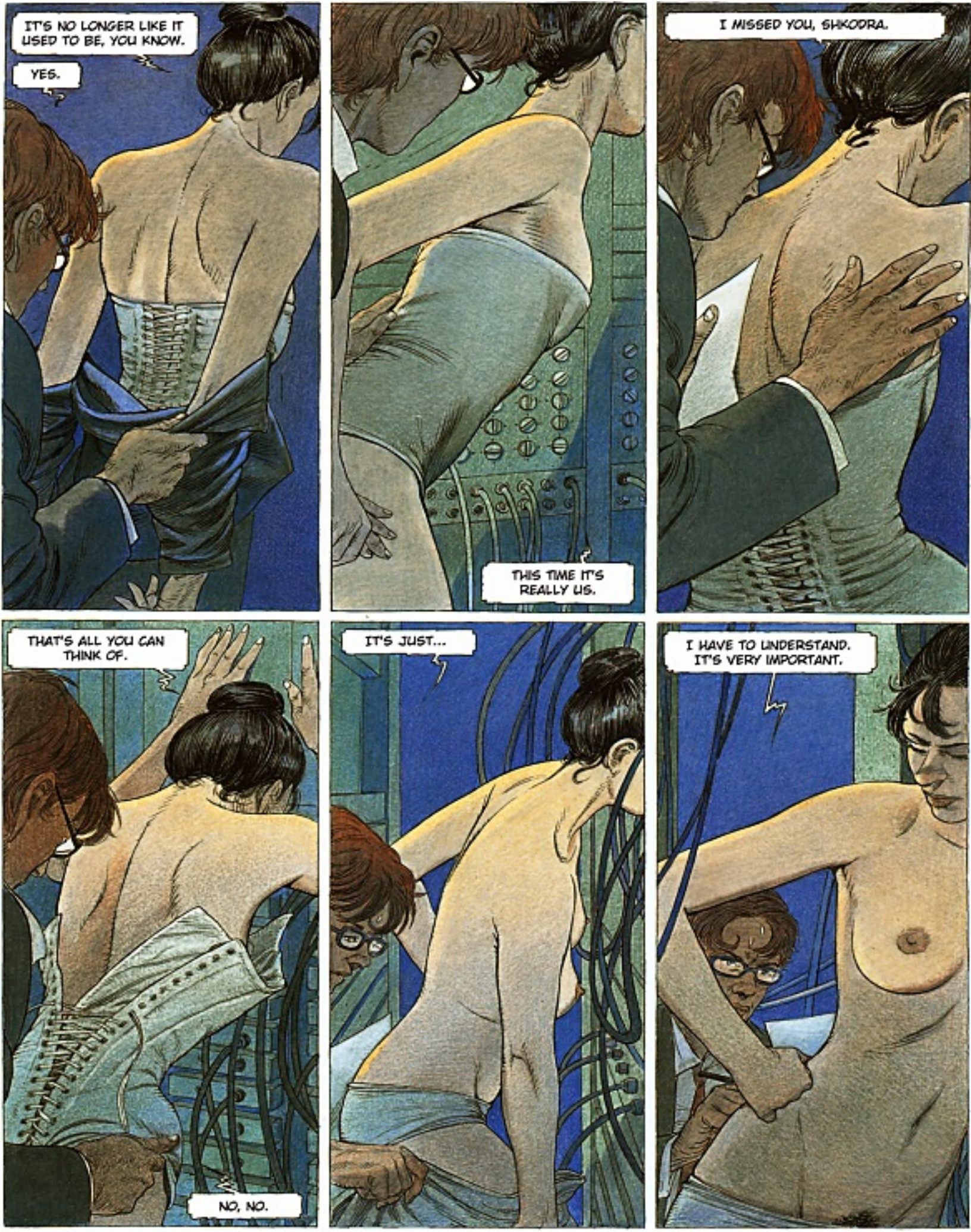
MEANWHILE WE'RE TRYING TO MANAGE AS BEST WE CAN BETWEEN THE OLD SYSTEM AND THE NEW. OH, I TELL YOU!
I'VE PLACED A TEAM OF YOUNG FOLK AT YOUR SERVICE. I'M SURE YOU'LL MAKE IT WORK, JUST DON'T GET LOST IN THE DETAILS! THE FRONTIER OF GREATER SODROVNIA, THAT'S WHAT YOU HAVE TO MAKE EVIDENT! IF YOU'LL PARDON THE PHRASE, WE DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT THE REST!
VERY WELL, MASTER NICOLAS.
JUST CALL ME NICOLAS, NO MORE "MASTER" BETWEEN US, EH?

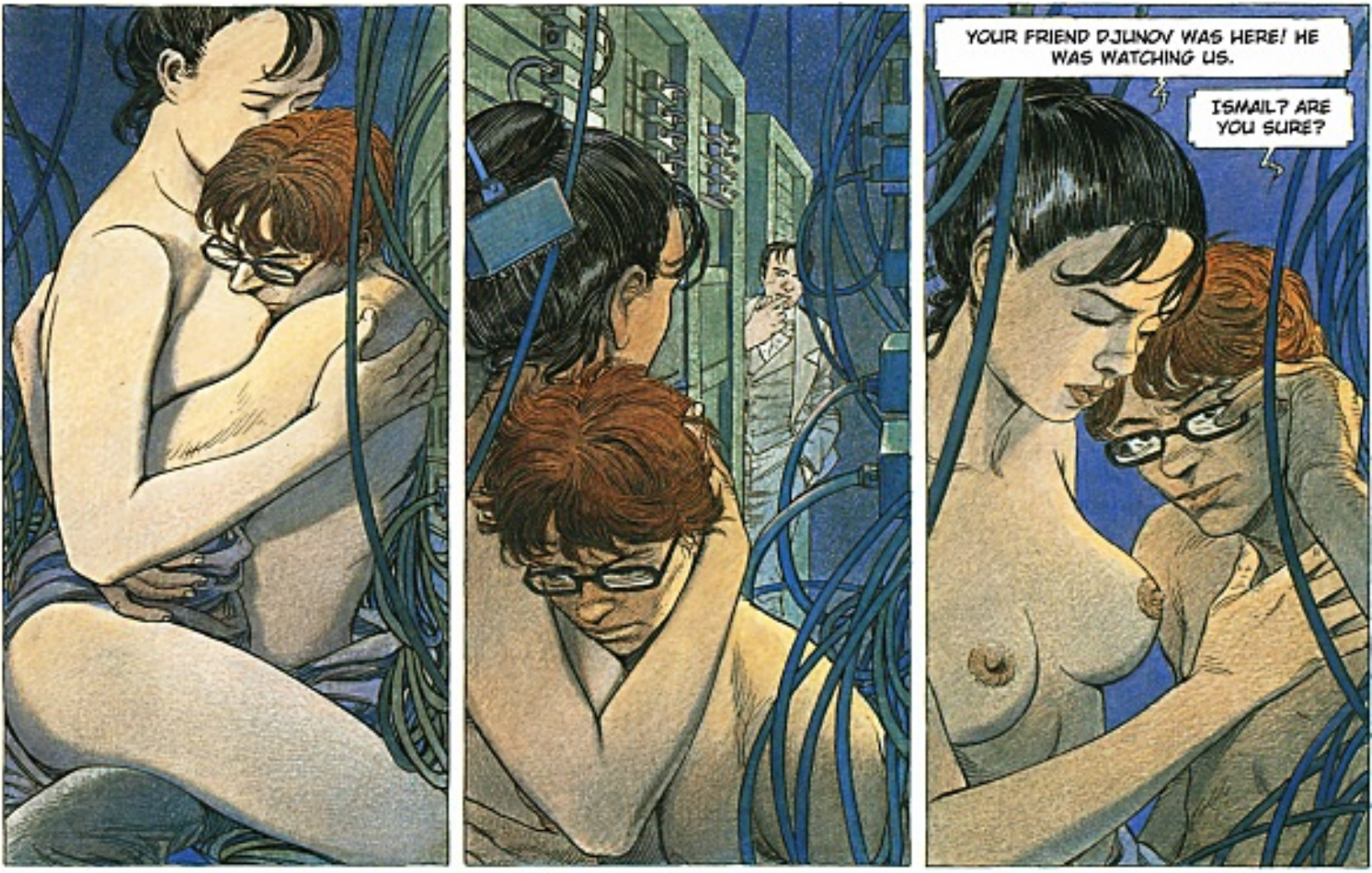
?
WHAT'S ALL THIS? IT'S INCREDIBLE.
UH OH, THERE HE IS.
MY WORD, HE'S SO YOUNG.
UH, DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME. KEEP GOING!
HELLO, MASTER DE CREMER. I'M VERY PLEASED TO MEET YOU AT LAST. I'M OSCAR PAULY, YOUR PERSONAL ASSISTANT. MASTER NICOLAS ASKED ME TO BE AT YOUR COMPLETE DISPOSAL.
WE'VE BEEN AWAITING YOU IMPATIENTLY, MASTER DE CREMER. ALL THE TEAMS ARE VERY MOTIVATED, TRUST ME! BUT WE DON'T ALWAYS KNOW HOW TO PROCEED.

MASTER DJUNOV'S MACHINE GENERATES A GREAT QUANTITY OF DATA. IT'S NOT VERY EASY SORTING IT ALL OUT, ESPECIALLY SINCE THE LAST BREAKDOWN.
YOU HAVEN'T SAID ANYTHING TO HIM?
UH, WE'VE ALREADY BOTHERED HIM SO MANY TIMES. HE SAYS THAT THE MACHINE CAN'T BE MISTAKEN, THAT WE'RE THE ONES WHO'VE NOT READ THE MANUALS ENOUGH, BUT...
AND WHERE ARE THE MAPS?
THE MAPS, UH, YOU MEAN THE OLD MAPS?
YES, THE REAL ONES!
WELL, LET'S JUST SAY THEY'RE NO LONGER HERE.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN? YOU'RE NOT GOING TO TELL ME YOU THREW THEM AWAY?
OH, NOT ME, MASTER DE CREMER!!! BUT MASTER DJUNOV SAID THAT IT WAS ALL USELESS NOW. SO I'M AFRAID THAT... WELL THERE MUST STILL BE A FEW LEFT.
KALIN! KALIN, HERE! WHAT'S GOTTEN INTO HIM?
RUFF! RUFF!
FIND EVERYTHING YOU CAN! ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING!
CERTAINLY, CERTAINLY. I'M SORRY, VERY, VERY SORRY!
RUFF!


WOOF! WOOF!
SHKODRA!
THAT'S A GOOD DOG. GOOD BOY!
I DIDN'T KNOW YOU WERE BACK. IT SEEMS YOU'VE BECOME SOMEBODY IMPORTANT.
BUT YOU... UH... YOU, THE CLUB?
THAT'S OVER NOW. EVERYTHING'S CHANGED FOR ME, TOO, YOU SEE.
DON'T YOU BE CONCERNED, MASTER DE CREMER! WE WERE FACING A PERSONNEL SHORTAGE. THESE LADIES, UH, THESE GIRLS... WELL... THEY ONLY ATTEND TO VERY SIMPLE TASKS.
WE'LL HAVE TO TALK.
I MUST TELL YOU, SIR, THAT NOBODY PAYS US ANY ATTENTION.
I'D SUGGESTED A "PINK" MAP, YOU KNOW! "THE FRONTIERS OF PLEASURE". I BET YOU THERE'D HAVE BEEN A MARKET.
A VERY OUT-OF-ORDER SUGGESTION.

SPEAKING OF MAPS, DON'T FORGET THOSE I ASKED YOU FOR. I WANT THEM VERY SOON.
YES, MASTER DE CREMER.
AND PREPARE ME A DETAILED REPORT ON THE PROBLEMS YOU'VE HAD WITH THE NEW MACHINES.
OF COURSE, OF COURSE.
COME, I HAVE SOME IMPORTANT THINGS TO TELL YOU!
COME ON!
IT'S IMPOSSIBLE. YOU'RE CRAZY.
HE MAY WELL HAVE GOTTEN PROMOTED, BUT HE HASN'T CHANGED!
HE'S STILL JUST AS STUCK ON HIS SHKODRA.


IT'S NO LONGER LIKE IT USED TO BE, YOU KNOW.
YES.
THIS TIME IT'S REALLY US.
I MISSED YOU, SHKODRA.
THAT'S ALL YOU CAN THINK OF.
NO, NO.
IT'S JUST...
I HAVE TO UNDERSTAND. IT'S VERY IMPORTANT.



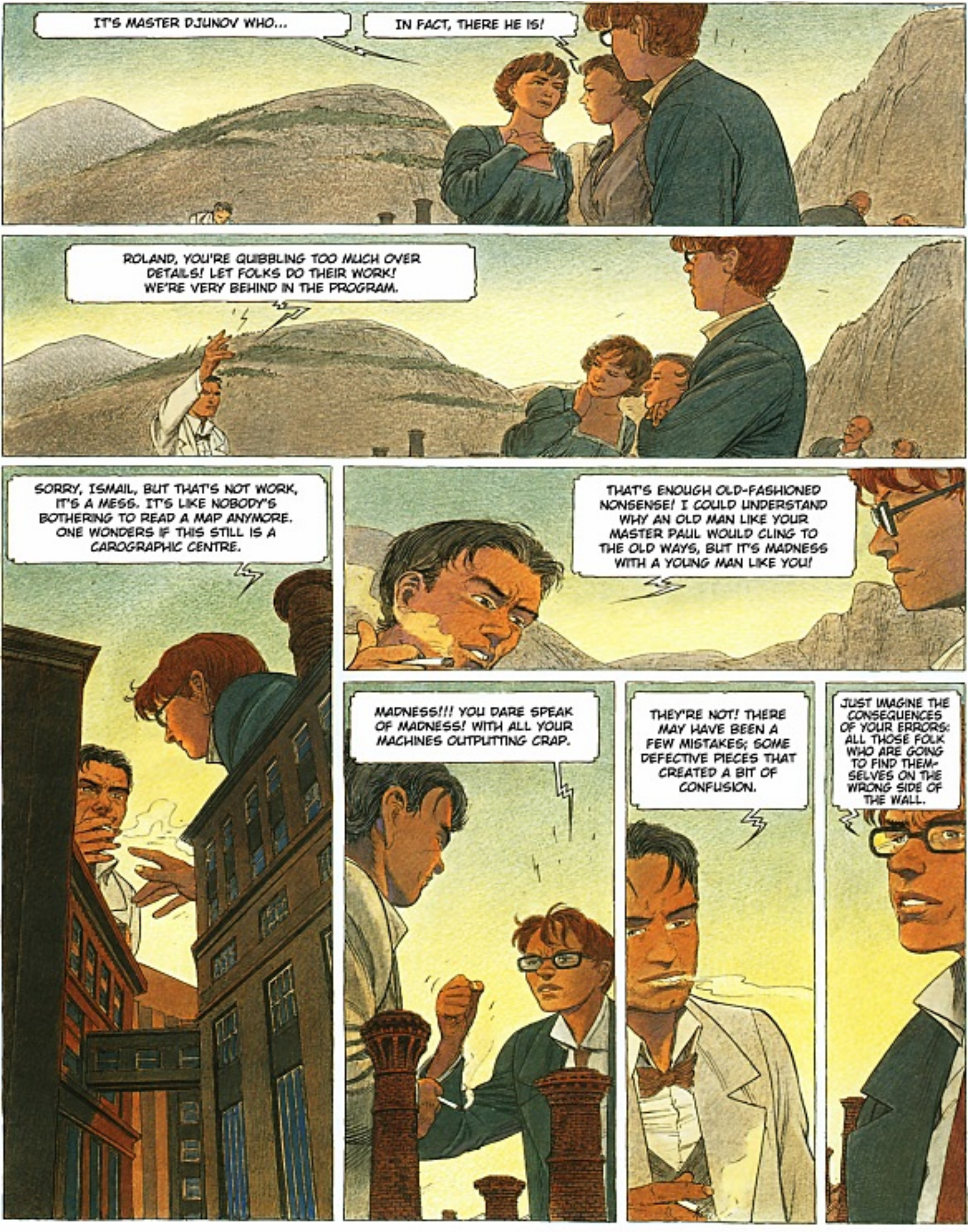
MY PIECE OF PAPER HAD DISAPPEARED. IT COULD ONLY BE HIM. WHAT DID HE WANT? I SHOULD HAVE SPOKEN TO HIM, BUT I DIDN'T HAVE THE HEART TO DO SO.

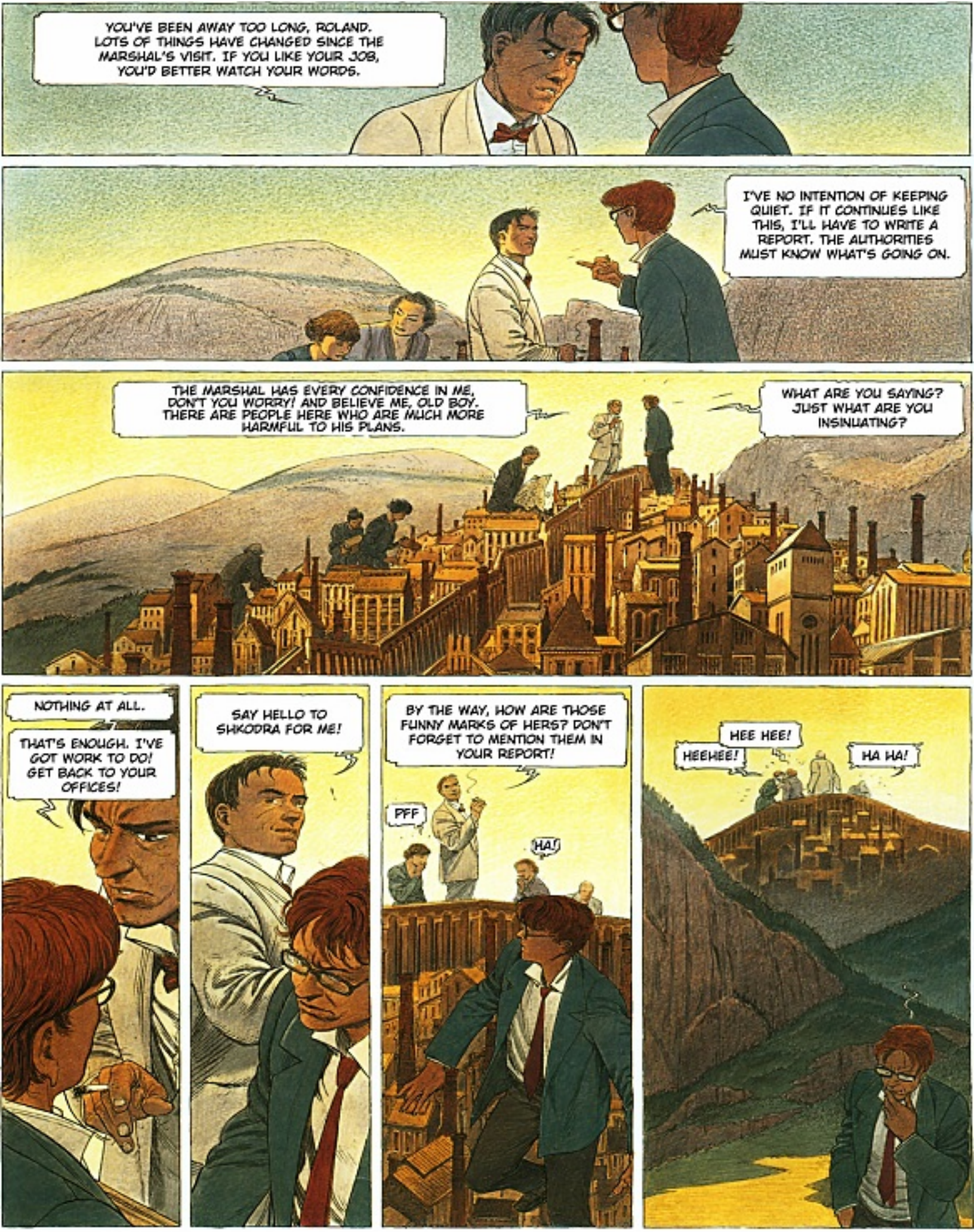
WHAT A DAY! MY HEAD WAS SPINNING. CLEARLY, MY RETURN ENDED UP NOTHING LIKE I'D IMAGINED IT.

6

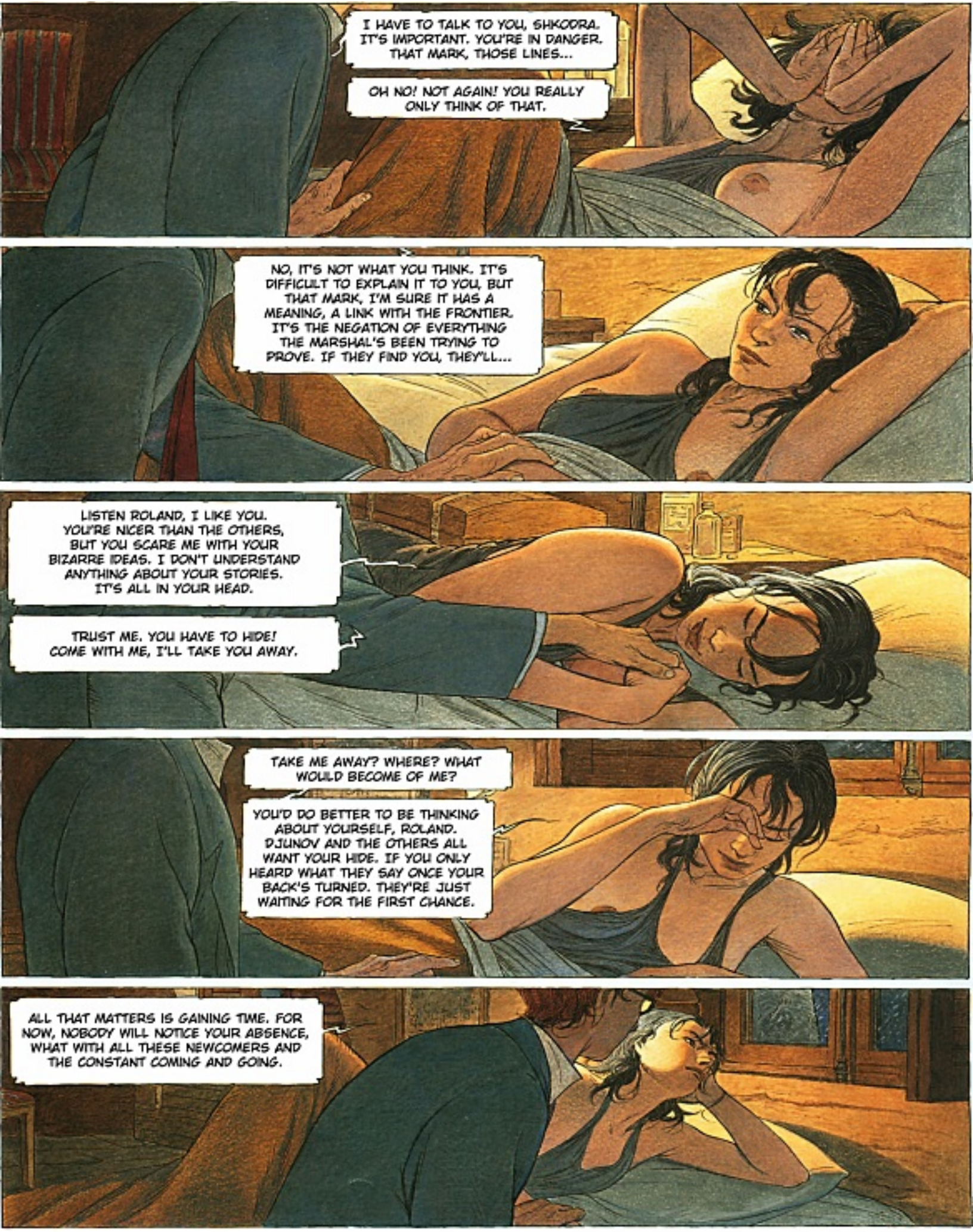
2 NOVEMBER 761
IN A FEW MOMENTS WE'RE GOING TO OFFER YOU A TAPE-DELAY BROADCAST OF A SPEECH BY MARSHAL RADISIC, THE SUPREME LEADER OF OUR WELL-BELOVED GREATER SODROVNIA.
"MY DEAR COMPATRIOTS, FOR YOUR COUNTRY, THE TIME OF HUMILIATION IS OVER! AS EVERY LIVING BEING, NATIONS HAVE THEIR NEEDS."
"THE GENIUS OF OUR PEOPLE IS TO SPREAD OUT, OR MORE ACCURATELY, TO REGAIN THE TERRITORY TO WHICH THEIR GLORIOUS HISTORY ENTITLES THEM."
"IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF OUR TIME TO MAKE MANIFEST THE FRONTIERS OF OUR GREATER SODROVNIA. AND IT IS MY RESPONSIBILITY, WITH YOUR UNFLAGGING SUPPORT, TO SOON MAKE THEM TANGIBLE."

WHAT ARE YOU DOING? YOU'RE RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF MYLOS THERE, NOT IN SODROVNO-VOLDACHIA!
WE'RE FOLLOWING THE DIRECTIONS, MASTER DE CREMER, I ASSURE YOU.
HERE ARE THE MAPS!
I DON'T NEED TO LOOK AT A MAP TO KNOW WHERE MYLOS IS LOCATED! AND ANYHOW, THIS WALL DOESN'T CORRESPOND TO ANYTHING. YOU'RE JUST REPRODUCING THE ERRORS THAT ARE ON THESE PAPERS!
AND I'M NOT SURE YOU'RE EVEN ON THE RIGHT SCALE!
WE JUST DO AS WE'RE TOLD, SIR. WE WERE TOLD TO WORK FAST.
THAT'S NO REASON TO JUST DO ANY OLD THING!
LOOK A LITTLE AT THIS PART OF THE CITY. WHY IS IT ON THE OTHER SIDE?
WE DON'T KNOW.


IT'S MASTER DJUNOV WHO...
IN FACT, THERE HE IS!
ROLAND, YOU'RE QUIBBLING TOO MUCH OVER DETAILS! LET FOLKS DO THEIR WORK! WE'RE VERY BEHIND IN THE PROGRAM.
SORRY, ISMAIL, BUT THAT'S NOT WORK, IT'S A MESS. IT'S LIKE NOBODY'S BOTHERING TO READ A MAP ANYMORE. ONE WONDERS IF THIS STILL IS A CARTOGRAPHIC CENTRE.
THAT'S ENOUGH OLD-FASHIONED NONSENSE! I COULD UNDERSTAND WHY AN OLD MAN LIKE YOUR MASTER PAUL WOULD CLING TO THE OLD WAYS, BUT IT'S MADNESS WITH A YOUNG MAN LIKE YOU!
MADNESS!!! YOU DARE SPEAK OF MADNESS! WITH ALL YOUR MACHINES OUTPUTTING CRAP.
THEY'RE NOT! THERE MAY HAVE BEEN A FEW MISTAKES; SOME DEFECTIVE PIECES THAT CREATED A BIT OF CONFUSION.
JUST IMAGINE THE CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR ERRORS: ALL THOSE FOLK WHO ARE GOING TO FIND THEMSELVES ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE WALL.


YOU'VE BEEN AWAY TOO LONG, ROLAND. LOTS OF THINGS HAVE CHANGED SINCE THE MARSHAL'S VISIT. IF YOU LIKE YOUR JOB, YOU'D BETTER WATCH YOUR WORDS.
I'VE NO INTENTION OF KEEPING QUIET. IF IT CONTINUES LIKE THIS, I'LL HAVE TO WRITE A REPORT. THE AUTHORITIES MUST KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON.
THE MARSHAL HAS EVERY CONFIDENCE IN ME, DON'T YOU WORRY! AND BELIEVE ME, OLD BOY. THERE ARE PEOPLE HERE WHO ARE MUCH MORE HARMFUL TO HIS PLANS.
WHAT ARE YOU SAYING? JUST WHAT ARE YOU INSINUATING?
NOTHING AT ALL.
THAT'S ENOUGH. I'VE GOT WORK TO DO! GET BACK TO YOUR OFFICES!
SAY HELLO TO SHKODRA FOR ME!
BY THE WAY, HOW ARE THOSE FUNNY MARKS OF HERS? DON'T FORGET TO MENTION THEM IN YOUR REPORT!
PFF
HA!
HEE HEE!
HEEHEE!
HA HA!

WELL, EVEN WITH A PROMOTION, THAT ONE HASN'T CHANGED.
SHKODRA... SHKODRA!
OH, IT'S YOU.
HOW'S IT GOING? I WAS TOLD YOU WEREN'T WELL.


I HAVE TO TALK TO YOU, SHKOORA. IT'S IMPORTANT. YOU'RE IN DANGER. THAT MARK, THOSE LINES...
OH NO! NOT AGAIN! YOU REALLY ONLY THINK OF THAT.
NO, IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK. IT'S DIFFICULT TO EXPLAIN IT TO YOU, BUT THAT MARK, I'M SURE IT HAS A MEANING, A LINK WITH THE FRONTIER. IT'S THE NEGATION OF EVERYTHING THE MARSHAL'S BEEN TRYING TO PROVE. IF THEY FIND YOU, THEY'LL...
LISTEN ROLAND, I LIKE YOU. YOU'RE NICER THAN THE OTHERS, BUT YOU SCARE ME WITH YOUR BIZARRE IDEAS. I DON'T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR STORIES. IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD.
TRUST ME. YOU HAVE TO HIDE! COME WITH ME, I'LL TAKE YOU AWAY.
TAKE ME AWAY? WHERE? WHAT WOULD BECOME OF ME?
YOU'D DO BETTER TO BE THINKING ABOUT YOURSELF, ROLAND. DJUNOV AND THE OTHERS ALL WANT YOUR HIDE. IF YOU ONLY HEARD WHAT THEY SAY ONCE YOUR BACK'S TURNED. THEY'RE JUST WAITING FOR THE FIRST CHANCE.
ALL THAT MATTERS IS GAINING TIME. FOR NOW, NOBODY WILL NOTICE YOUR ABSENCE, WHAT WITH ALL THESE NEWCOMERS AND THE CONSTANT COMING AND GOING.

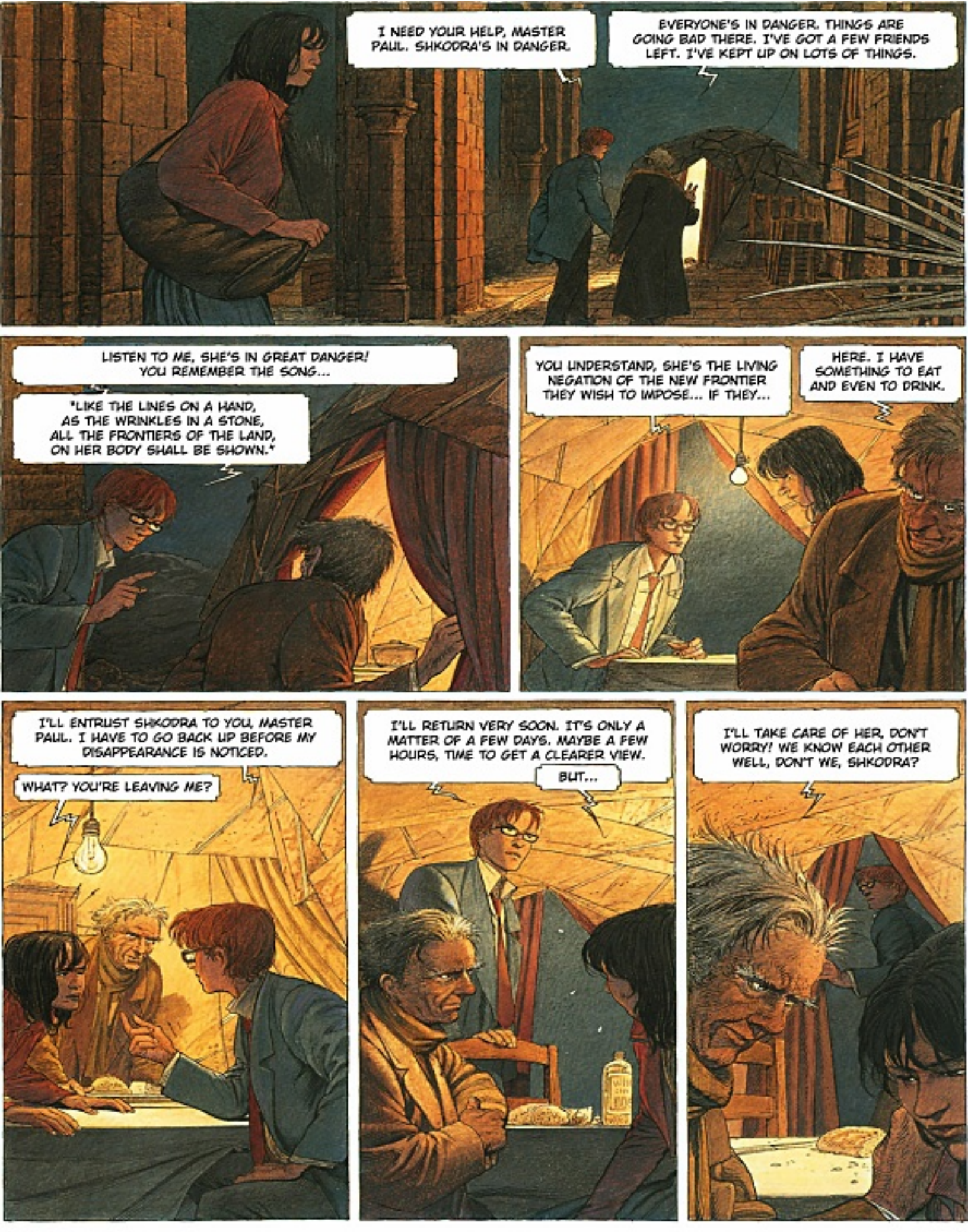
YOU JUST HAVE TO STAY A WHILE IN THE STORAGE AREA. WHERE ALL THE OLD MAPS ARE.
WE'LL HAVE TO GET OUT THIS WAY. WE CAN'T GO BACK DOWN THROUGH THE CLUB.
YOU'RE CRAZY, IT'S WAY TOO DANGEROUS!
NO, IT'LL BE OKAY. BE SURE TO COVER UP WELL!
YOU'RE WANTING TO LOCK ME AWAY, IS THAT IT? ARE YOU AFRAID THE OTHERS ARE TOUCHING ME?
COME ON!
I GUESS I DON'T HAVE A CHOICE!
WHAT A WIND!

WHOAA! IT'S VERY SLIPPERY!
WE'LL NEVER MAKE IT.
SURE WE WILL. IT'S NOT SO DIFFICULT.
WAIT!
MY GLASSES. I CAN'T SEE A THING.
WE'RE ALMOST THERE. THIS WAY!

FROM HERE, I THINK THERE'S A WAY WE CAN REACH THE STORAGE AREA.
NOBODY COMES DOWN HERE, THEY'LL NEVER FIND YOU DOWN HERE.
THIS IS THE OLDEST PART: THE VESTIGES OF THE OLD CONSERVATION CENTRE. IT MUST DATE BACK TO THE SIXTH CENTURY.
WELL, IT DOESN'T SMELL VERY GOOD.
THERE MUST BE SOME WAY TO HAVE SOME LIGHT. AH THERE!
!!
WHAT ARE ALL THESE HORRORS?
UH. I DON'T REALLY KNOW. LET'S MOVE ON.
WHY DID YOU BRING ME HERE? DO YOU REALLY THINK I'M GOING TO STAY ALL BY MYSELF IN SUCH A PLACE?
DON'T WORRY.

I PROMISE YOU WE'LL FIND A MORE QUIET AREA.
BLAM
DID YOU HEAR THAT? DO YOU REALLY THINK NOBODY'S HERE?
WHO'D WANT TO COME HERE? HEY, LOOK, WE'RE COMING IN TO THE ZONE OF TERRESTRIAL GLOBES... A RETURN TO CIVILIZATION!
IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING.
SOMEONE'S THERE, I TELL YOU.
WHO GOES THERE?

MAS... MASTER PAUL! WHAT..?
!
ROLAND! SHKODRA! HOW NICE OF YOU TO COME VISIT ME!
BUT WHAT ARE YOU DOING DOWN HERE?
YOU OUGHT TO ASK, INSTEAD, WHAT I'D BE DOING ANYWHERE ELSE! WHERE WOULD I GO? THIS PLACE HAS BEEN MY WHOLE LIFE. I ARRIVED HERE WHEN I WAS 14 YEARS OLD.
MAYBE I'M WHERE I BELONG, IN THE STORAGE AREAS. FOR AN OLD-FASHIONED GUY LIKE ME, EVEN THE ODOUR OF FORMALDEHYDE ISN'T TOO MUCH OF A BOTHER!
CAREFUL, SHKODRA, WE'RE COMING INTO THE PORCUPINE AREA.
I DIDN'T THINK SUCH ANIMALS EXISTED.


I NEED YOUR HELP, MASTER PAUL. SHKODRA'S IN DANGER.
EVERYONE'S IN DANGER. THINGS ARE GOING BAD THERE. I'VE GOT A FEW FRIENDS LEFT. I'VE KEPT UP ON LOTS OF THINGS.
LISTEN TO ME, SHE'S IN GREAT DANGER! YOU REMEMBER THE SONG...
"LIKE THE LINES ON A HAND, AS THE WRINKLES IN A STONE, ALL THE FRONTIERS OF THE LAND, ON HER BODY SHALL BE SHOWN."
YOU UNDERSTAND, SHE'S THE LIVING NEGATION OF THE NEW FRONTIER THEY WISH TO IMPOSE... IF THEY...
HERE. I HAVE SOMETHING TO EAT AND EVEN TO DRINK.
I'LL ENTRUST SHKODRA TO YOU, MASTER PAUL. I HAVE TO GO BACK UP BEFORE MY DISAPPEARANCE IS NOTICED.
WHAT? YOU'RE LEAVING ME?
I'LL RETURN VERY SOON. IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF A FEW DAYS. MAYBE A FEW HOURS, TIME TO GET A CLEARER VIEW.
BUT...
I'LL TAKE CARE OF HER, DON'T WORRY! WE KNOW EACH OTHER WELL, DON'T WE, SHKODRA?

7

MASTER DE CREMER! MASTER DE CREMER!
IT'S ME, OSCAR, YOUR ASSISTANT.
WHAT IS IT? DO YOU KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS?
COME QUICK! EVERYONE'S SEARCHING FOR YOU.
THIS IS THE LAST STRAW!!!
WOOF! WOOF!
I'M GONNA COMPLAIN TO MASTER NICOLAS AND GET YOU SENT TO THE BOSS'S AREA, BOTH YOU AND YOUR DOG! WE'LL FINALLY HAVE SOME PEACE AROUND HERE!
THIS WAY, THEY'RE WAITING FOR YOU.
WHO IS..? WHAT'S GOING ON?
THE SOLDIERS ARRIVED YESTERDAY EVENING. THEY TOOK CONTROL OF EVERYTHING.
I LOCKED FOR YOU BUT...
I WASN'T THERE, I KNOW.

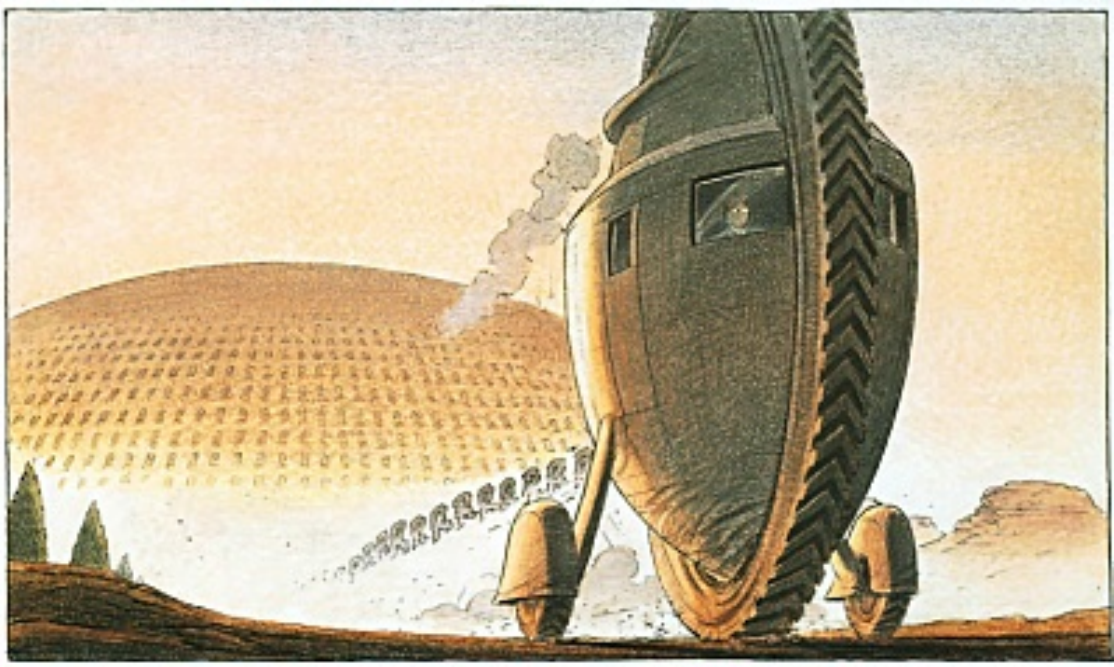
I'LL LEAVE YOU HERE... UH... YOU NO LONGER NEED ME.
YOU DIDN'T UNDERSTAND ME, MASTER NICOLAS. AS OF YESTERDAY, THE CARTOGRAPHIC CENTRE IS UNDER THE ARMY'S AUTHORITY. AN AUTHORITY IT NEVER SHOULD HAVE LEFT!
THE CIVIL ADMINISTRATION HAS PROVEN ITS INCOMPETENCE. YOU HAVE BURIED US UNDER A FLOOD OF USELESS, CONFUSING DATA.
BUT... HIC... I ASSURE YOU...
IN FACT, YOU ENDED UP DROWNING IN YOUR OWN DATA!
I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING. ALL THOSE MACHINES WEREN'T WORKING... HIS... MASTER PAUL WAS RIGHT. IT'S THAT DJUNOV, HE...
THAT'S THE LAST STRAW! WHEN HE'S THE ONE WHO CAUSED THE BREAKDOWN! EXCUSE ME, COLONEL, BUT...
YOU'LL SETTLE ACCOUNTS AT SOME OTHER POINT; YOU'RE WASTING MY TIME! YOU'LL ANSWER TO THE TRIBUNAL FOR YOUR ACTIONS!
TAKE HIM AWAY!
SAY SOMETHING ROLAND! YOU KNOW I HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IT!

COLONEL SAINT-ARNAULD, PROVISORY ADMINISTRATOR.
UH...
HELLO, COLONEL, I...
SO YOU'RE THE FAMOUS DE CREMER. WHERE WERE YOU YESTERDAY? YOU DIDN'T RECIEVE OUR MESSAGES?
I, NO, A HEALTH PROBLEM...
YOU'VE BEEN SUMMONED IMMEDIATELY TO SEE MARSHAL RADISIC. DON'T ASK ME WHY; I KNOW NOTHING ABOUT IT! ONE OF OUR TRANSPORTS IS RETURNING TO GALATOGRAD.
THE DRIVER'S BEEN INFORMED. HE'S WAITING FOR YOU.
RIGHT NOW...?
RIGHT AWAY. YOU SHOULD ALREADY BE GONE.
UH... OKAY... LET ME GRAB A FEW THINGS AND...
HURRY UP!
AS FOR YOU... UH... DJUNOV... HAVEN'T YET DECIDED ON YOUR FATE. BUT THERE'S ONE THING YOU'D BETTER UNDERSTAND; THERE'S NO MORE ROOM FOR MISTAKES.

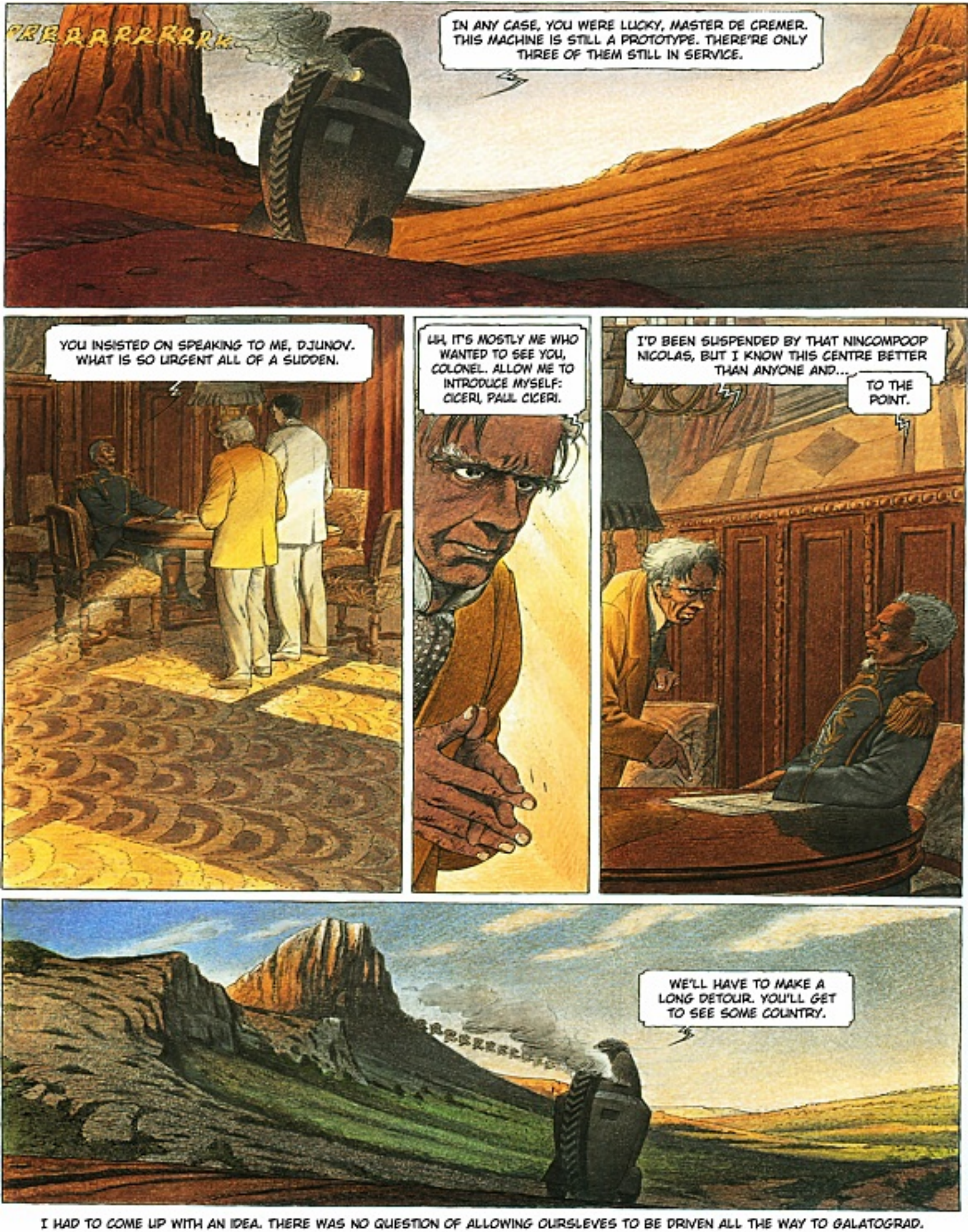
THE PAGE HAD TURNED FOR ME, TOO! I HAD TO LEAVE.

WHEN WOULD I RETURN?
I HAD NO IDEA.

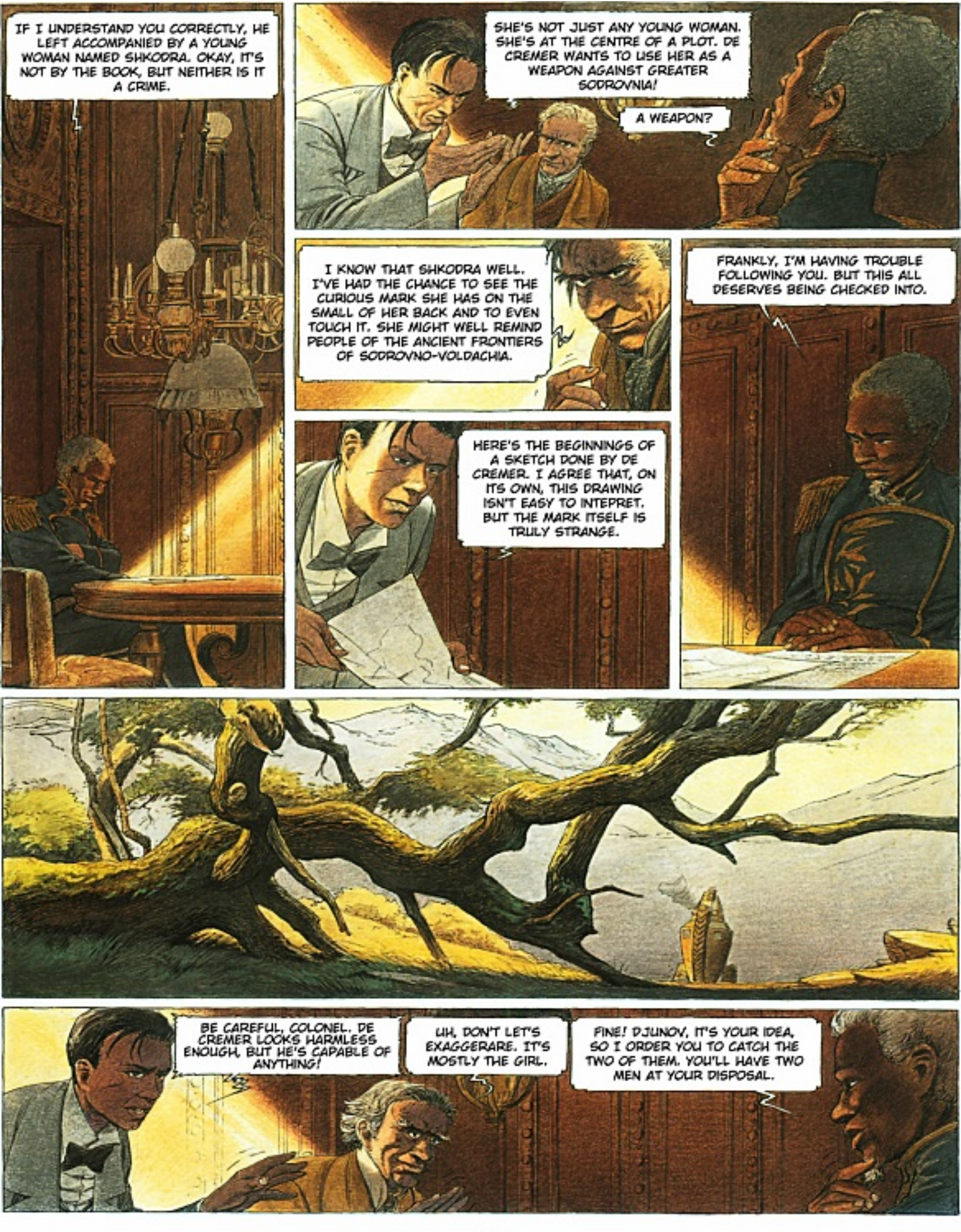
YOU CAN'T STAY HERE. IF DJUNOV SEES YOU, WE'RE DOOMED.
I WAS PLANNING TO COME SEE YOU, YOU KNOW. SURELY YOU DON'T THINK I'D HAVE...?
WITH YOU, I NO LONGER KNOW WHAT TO THINK!
THIS WAY!
!!
WATCH OUT!
BLAM
AH, MASTER ROLAND! FINALLY!
YOU'RE NOT GOING TO LET THIS GO ON!
THEY WANT TO GET RID OF US.
SOME PEOPLE SAY WE KNOW TOO MUCH, THAT WE'RE GOING TO BE ARRESTED.
LET'S HURRY!
WHY ARE YOU LEAVING? YOU'RE ABANDONING US, TOO! WHAT WILL BECOME OF US?



I HAD NO IDEA WHAT WE WERE GOING TO DO. ONE THING WAS CERTAIN: WE COULD NO LONGER GO BACK.

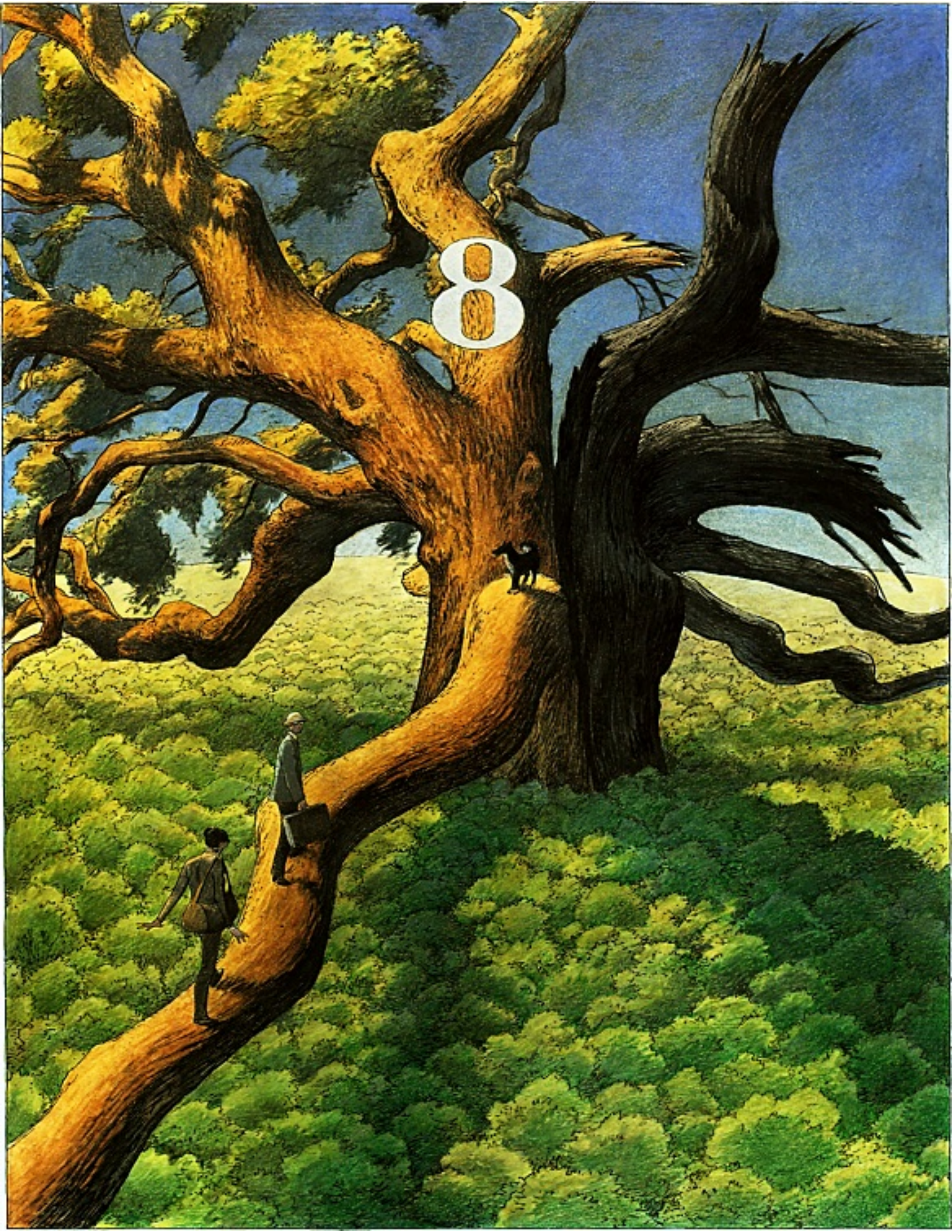


I HAD TO COME UP WITH AN IDEA. THERE WAS NO QUESTION OF ALLOWING OURSLEVES TO BE DRIVEN ALL THE WAY TO GALATOGRAD.


IF I UNDERSTAND YOU CORRECTLY, HE LEFT ACCOMPANIED BY A YOUNG WOMAN NAMED SHKODRA. OKAY, IT'S NOT BY THE BOOK, BUT NEITHER IS IT A CRIME.
SHE'S NOT JUST ANY YOUNG WOMAN. SHE'S AT THE CENTRE OF A PLOT. DE CREMER WANTS TO USE HER AS A WEAPON AGAINST GREATER SODROVNIA!
A WEAPON?
I KNOW THAT SHKODRA WELL. I'VE HAD THE CHANCE TO SEE THE CURIOUS MARK SHE HAS ON THE SMALL OF HER BACK AND TO EVEN TOUCH IT. SHE MIGHT WELL REMIND PEOPLE OF THE ANCIENT FRONTIERS OF SODROVNO-VOLDACHIA.
FRANKLY, I'M HAVING TROUBLE FOLLOWING YOU. BUT THIS ALL DESERVES BEING CHECKED INTO.
HERE'S THE BEGINNINGS OF A SKETCH DONE BY DE CREMER. I AGREE THAT, ON ITS OWN, THIS DRAWING ISN'T EASY TO INTEPRET. BUT THE MARK ITSELF IS TRULY STRANGE.
BE CAREFUL, COLONEL. DE CREMER LOOKS HARMLESS ENOUGH, BUT HE'S CAPABLE OF ANYTHING!
UH, DON'T LET'S EXAGGERARE. IT'S MOSTLY THE GIRL.
FINE! DJUNOV, IT'S YOUR IDEA, SO I ORDER YOU TO CATCH THE TWO OF THEM. YOU'LL HAVE TWO MEN AT YOUR DISPOSAL.

THE ORDINARY ROUTE ISN'T USABLE FOR THE MOMENT BECAUSE OF THE CONFLICT. IT'S TRUE THAT THIS MACHINE ISN'T VERY FAST, BUT IT CAN GO OVER ANYTHING... SO LONG AS YOU KNOW HOW TO PILOT IT!
THERE'S A BUNK IN BACK. OF COURSE, IT'S BESIDE THE MOTOR.
RRRRRRRR
WELL, IT SURE JOSTLES YOU, AND THAT ENDLESS NOISE. YOU CAN'T HEAR ANYTHING.
DO YOU WANT TO GO REST A MOMENT?
TO CROSS OVER THE RIVER, WE'LL GO INTO OUR FLOATING MODE. YOU'LL SEE THE MECHANISM IS QUITE INGENIOUS.
SOME WAPPENDORF FELLOW CAME UP WITH THE BASIC IDEA, BUT THE ARMY MANAGED TO MAKE IT REALLY USEFUL. YOU'LL SEE!
I'LL GO LET MY, UH, COLLEAGUE KNOW.
TELL HER NOT TO FRET. I'VE LOGGED 750 HOURS OF AMPHIBIOUS NAVIGATION!
YES, BUT WITH ALL THE GOINGS-ON... SHE'S A LITTLE... YOU UNDERSTAND.

IT'S NOW OR NEVER, SHKODRA. WE HAVE TO GO.
ARE YOU SURE?
WE JUST HAVE TO SLIDE DOWN. WE'RE VERY CLOSE TO THE BANK.
BRRR!
THIS REALLY TAKES THE CAKE!
COME, KALIN!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WE'D BEEN WALKING FOR HOURS, ANXIOUS TO GET AS FAR AWAY AS POSSIBLE.

!

THE FRONTIER! THEY REALLY BUILT IT?!

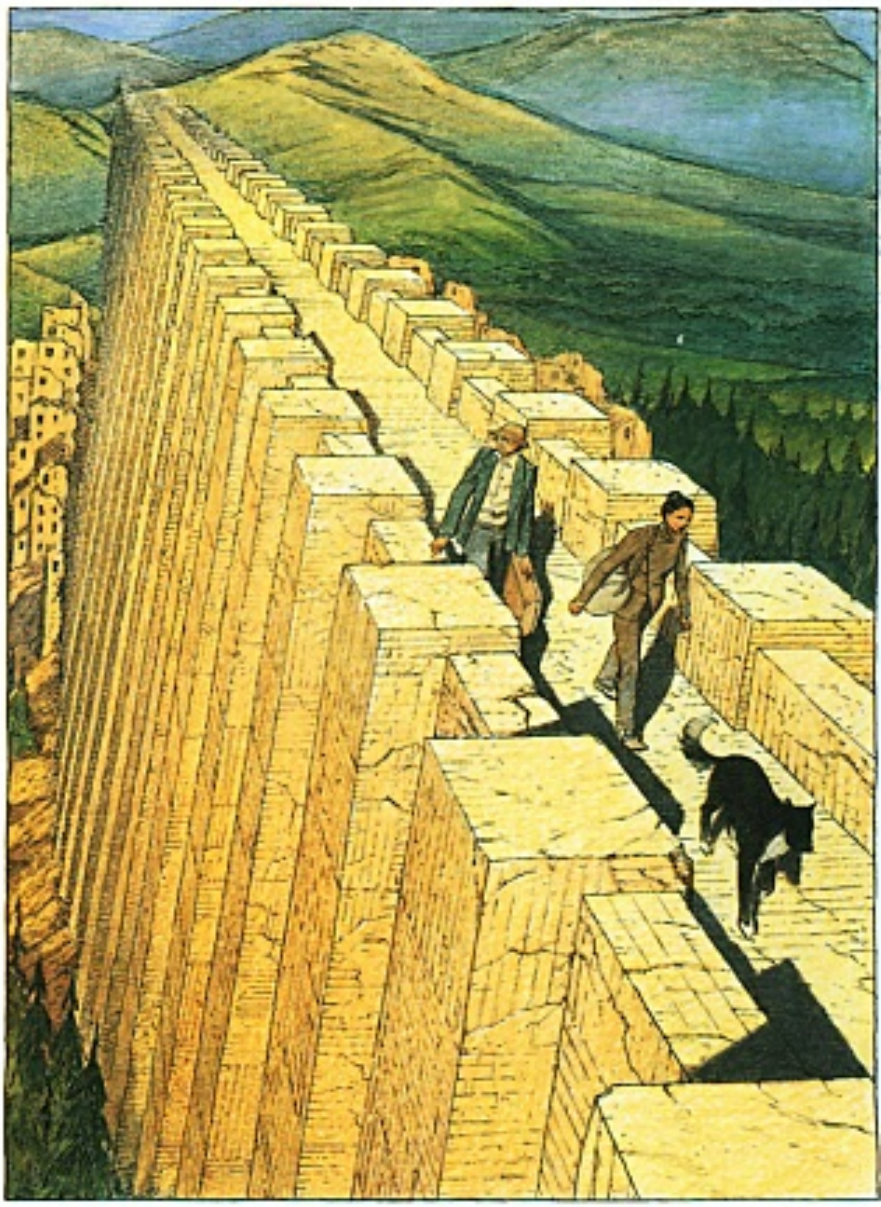
HOW WERE THEY ABLE TO MOVE SO FAST?

WELL NOW, I'M REALLY LOST!

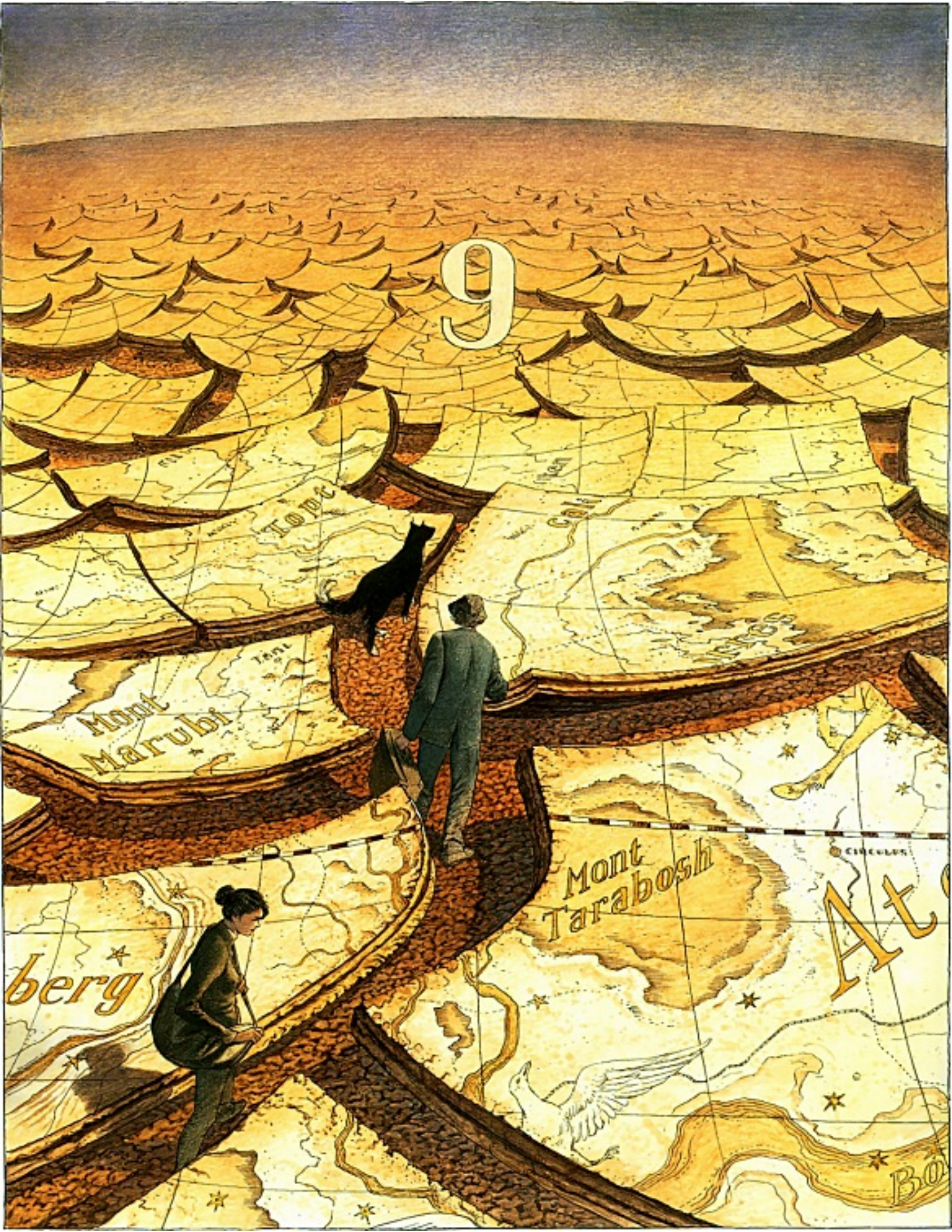
AH! A MILEPOST! AT LAST...

ŠKODRA
THAT'S FUNNY. THE VILLAGE HAS THE SAME NAME AS YOU!
IT'S NOT FUNNY AT ALL. THAT'S WHERE I COME FROM.

THEY'D GIVE GIRLS IN THE CLUB THE NAMES OF THE PLACES WHERE WE'D BEEN PICKED UP.
OH. I'M SORRY. I DIDN'T KNOW.
HOLY COW, THE WALL!
YOU... YOU HAD FAMILY HERE?
DROP IT! I HAVE NOBODY HERE OR ANY-WHERE ELSE. I PREFER TO FORGET ALL THAT.



WE LET OURSELVES BE GUIDED BY THE WALL. SHKODRA DIDN'T LOOK BACK A SINGLE TIME.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Mont
Marubi
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Tarabosh

THE WALL WAS INTERRUPTED VERY QUICKLY. FOR TWO DAYS, WE FOUND BITS, THEN NOTHING MORE.

WE CONTINUED ON STRAIGHT AHED, OR RATHER, AS STRAIGHT AS THE MOUNTAIN WOULD ALLOW US TO GO.
WE DIDN'T EVEN KNOW IF WE'D ALREADY LEFT SOOROVNO-VOLDACHIA.

THE WEATHER CHANGED CONSTANTLY. OUR PROVISIONS HAD LONG SINCE BEEN EXHAUSTED. WE WERE OVERCOME WITH FATIGUE.

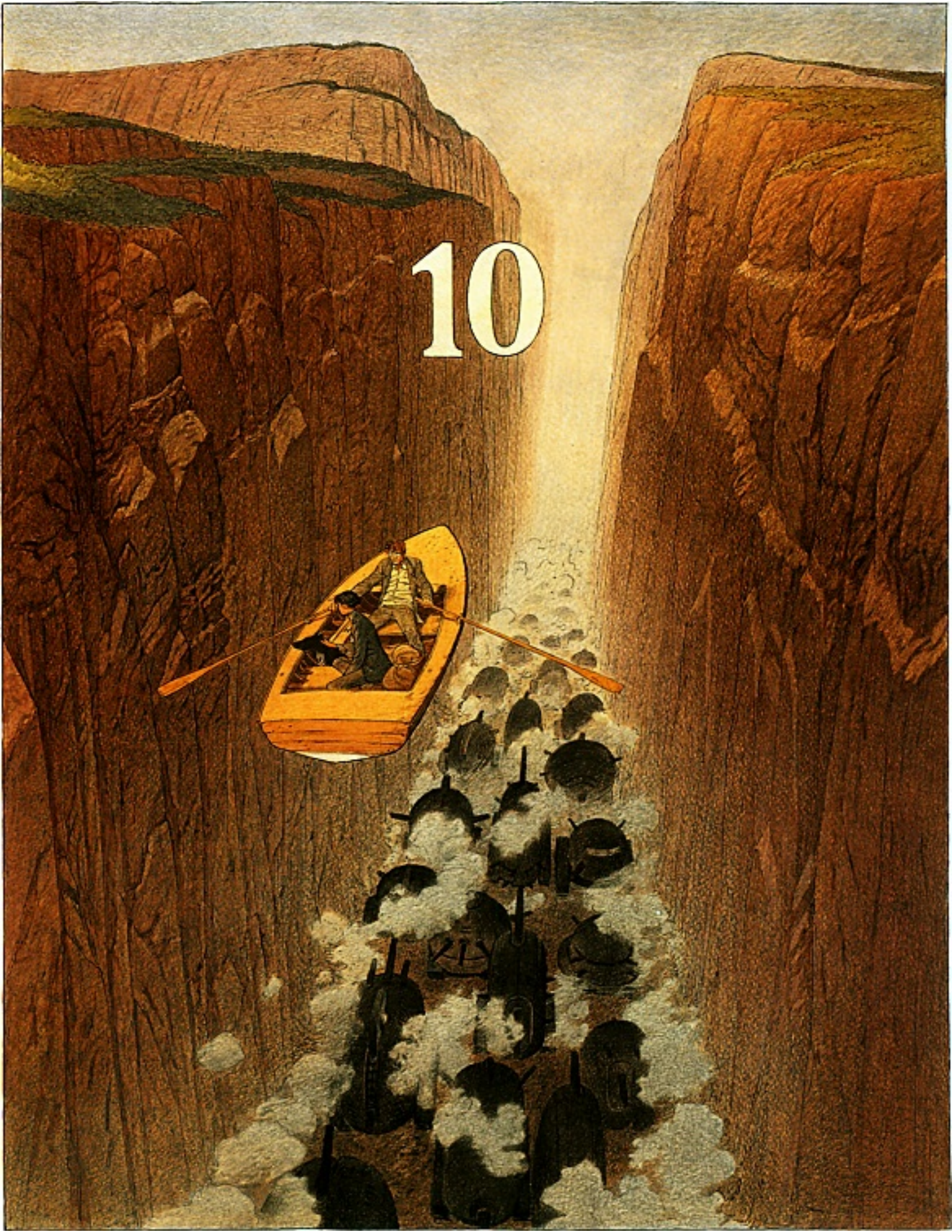
WE SLEPT ON STRANGE SOIL WITHOUT BEING AWARE OF WHERE WE WERE. HOW HAD THE MAPS BEEN ABLE TO FOOL ME FOR SO MANY YEARS?

WE COULD NO LONGER GO BACK. WE CONTINUED TO GO FORWARD EVEN SLOWER THAN THE DAY BEFORE. WE SCARCELY SPOKE ANYMORE.

WE ALSO THREW OURSELVES ON WHAT WE'D FOUND: SOME WHEAT CAKES, DRIED FISH, AND CIDER THAT BURNED OUR THROATS.

LOADED WITH PROVISIONS, WE STARTED WALKING AGAIN. WE DIDN'T DARE IMAGINE WHAT HAD HAPPENED,NOR TOWARDS WHAT WE WERE HEADED.

FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE MY DEPARTURE FROM THE CENTRE, I THOUGHT OF MY PARENTS. THEY HAD TO HAVE BEEN NOTIFIED OF MY DISAPPEARANCE. THEY MUST BE WORRIED TO DEATH.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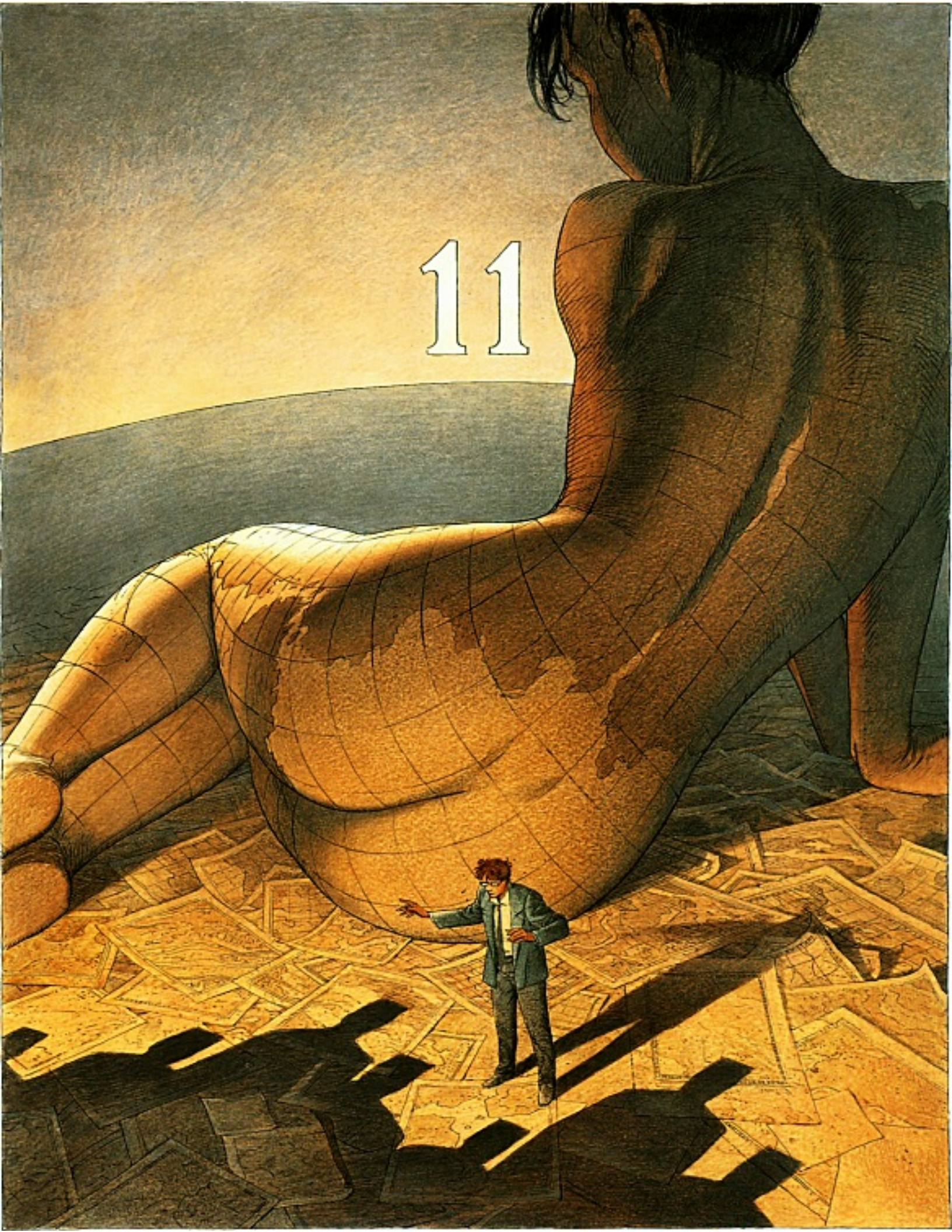
I WAS AT THE VERY LOCATION UPON WHICH MASTER PAUL HAD ME WORK THE DAY OF MY ARRIVAL AT THE CENTRE. IT'S AS IF EVERYTHING WERE SCRIPTED.

I'D LEFT ON A WHIM, FORCING SHKODRA TO FOLLOW ME. I'D MADE BLUNDER AFTER BLUNDER WITH HER. SHE MISTRUSTED ME, SPOKE TO ME LESS AND LESS.

AS FOR ME, FOR SEVERAL DAYS NOW, I NO LONGER EVEN KNEW WHAT FEELINGS I HAD LEFT FOR HER.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LISTEN, ROLAND, I'M SORRY ABOUT THE DOG. I DIDN'T WANT THINGS TO TURN OUT LIKE THIS.

I'M UNDER ORDERS. I'M NO FREER THAN YOU ARE.
YOU'RE WASTING YOUR BREATH, ISMAIL. YOU'RE NOT FOOLING ANYONE.
OKAY, HERE HE IS.

WELCOME, MARSHAL.

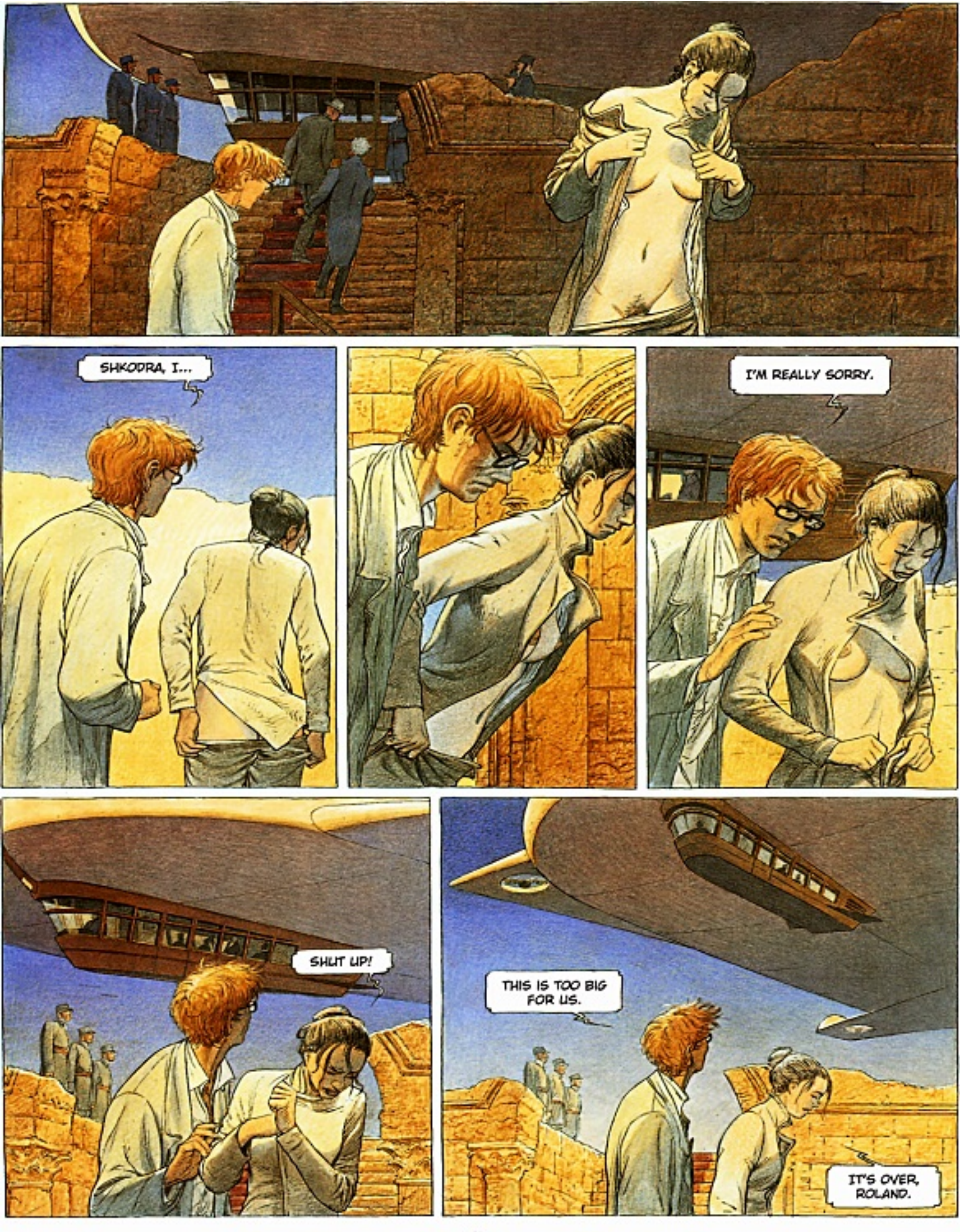
LUCKILY YOU WERE IN THE AREA, MARSHAL. THANK YOU FOR HAVING MADE THIS DETOUR. I ADMIT THIS STORY IS STRANGE AND ENTIRELY BEYOND MY GRASP.
I HOPE YOU'VE NOT INCONVENIENCED ME FOR NOTHING.
MASTER DJUNOV THINKS THAT IT'S VERY SERIOUS. THAT IT'S A MATTER OF STATE SECURITY. IT TOOK SOME TIME TO LET MYSELF BE PERSUADED.
A MATTER OF STATE SECURITY? DE CREMER'S HEIR?
SO, MASTER... UH... DJUNOV, IT SEEMS YOU'VE UNCOVERED A PLOT.
I HOPE SO, MARSHAL. I'VE BEEN OBSERVING DE CREMER FOR SOME TIME. I SUSPECTED HE WAS UP TO SOMETHING. IF HE FLED THE CENTRE, IT'S BECAUSE HE WAS PLANNING TO USE THAT WOMAN... CERTAIN PECULIARITIES OF THAT WOMAN.

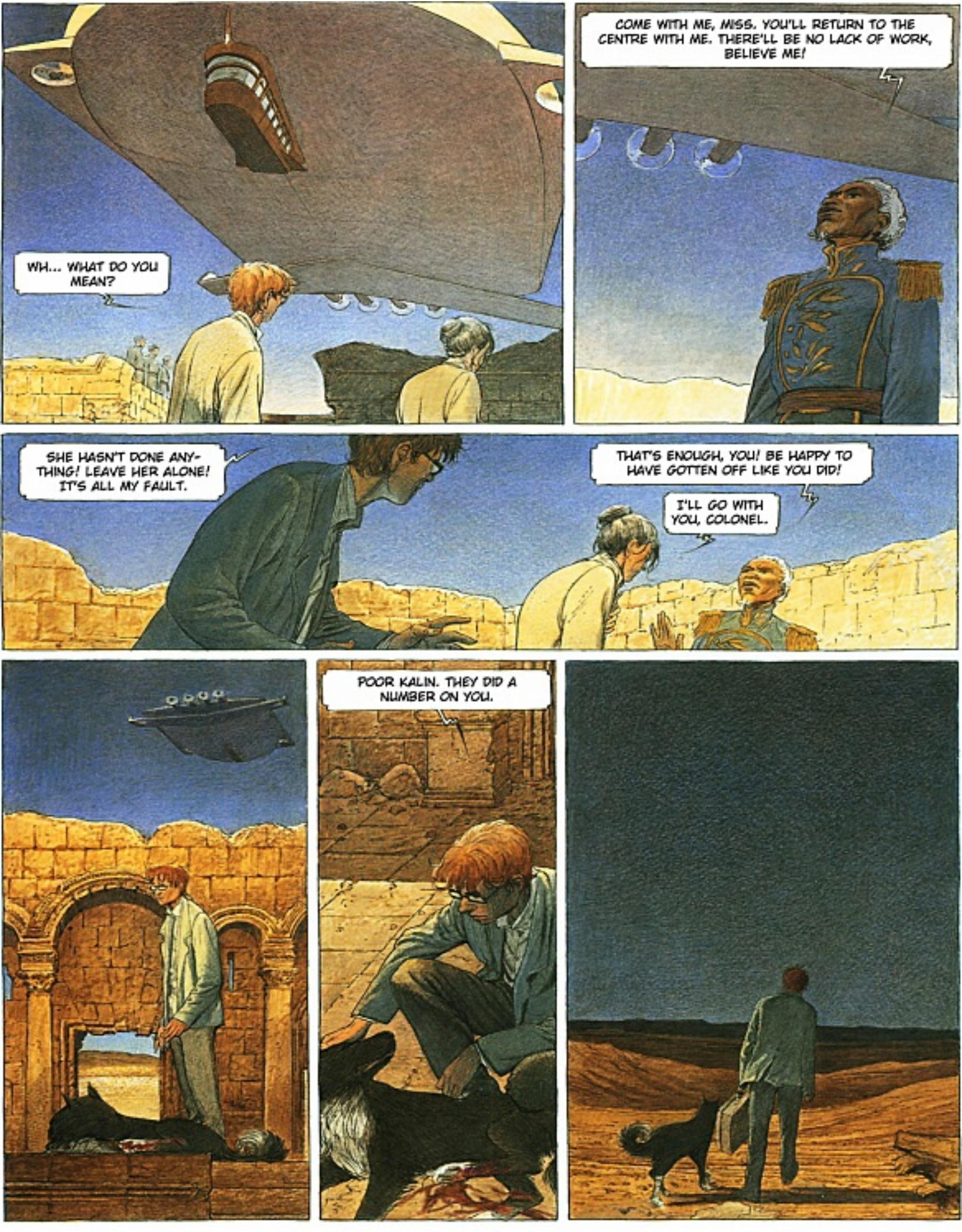
DE CREMER IS AN OLD FASHIONED TYPE AND IS OPPOSED TO NEW WAYS SUCH AS THE NEW MOVEMENT OF HISTORY. HE WAS TRYING TO STIR UP BACKWARDS PEASANTS BY MEANS OF OLD LEGENDS AND PSEUDO-SYMBOLS.
HE LIES!
WHAT ARROGANCE! THESE GILDED YOUTH THINK THEMSELVES FREE TO DO AS THEY PLEASE!
SILENCE DJUNOV! FREE THAT YOUNG MAN AND THAT LADY! THEY DON'T SEEM VERY DANGEROUS, AT LEAST NOT FOR THE MOMENT.
LET'S ALLOW OUR FUGITIVE TO EXPLAIN HIS THEORIES TO US! AFTER ALL, PERHAPS THEY'LL BE ENLIGHTENING.
THANK YOU, MARSHAL, I...
I WAS TO MEET YOU AT GALATOGRAD, DE CREMER. I HAD GREAT PLANS FOR YOU. WHY DIDN'T YOU ANSWER MY SUMMONS? YOU RECEIVED MY LETTER, DIDN'T YOU?
UH, YES, MARSHAL... IT'S... I'M WELL AWARE THAT...

I THOUGHT... PERHAPS I WAS WRONG... THAT I MUST GET THIS YOUNG WOMAN TO SAFETY, THAT SHE WAS CARRYING A SECRET THAT... HOW CAN I PUT IT? THAT PUT HER IN DANGER.
A SECRET? REALLY? OF WHAT KIND?
IT'S A BIT DELICATE. IT CONCERNS THE FRONTIER, BUT I DON'T KNOW IF...
EXPRESS YOURSELF CLEARLY, DE CREMER! AFTER ALL, WE HAVE NOTHING TO HIDE, DO WE?
IF YOU'LL COME CLOSER, IT'S... LOOK!
ROLAND, NO. I BEG YOU.
YOU HAVE TO SHKOORA. IT'S OUR ONLY CHANCE.
I UNDERSTAND LESS AND LESS. IF YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SHOW ME, OLD BOY, SHOW IT! I'VE GOT BETTER THINGS TO DO.

UH, THE LIGHT MAY NOT BE THE BEST, BUT DO YOU SEE THE FORM OF THAT MARK? IT'S EXACTLY LIKE THAT OF THE OLD SODROVNO-VOLDACHIA. THE EDGE IS UNMISTAKABLY LIKE THAT OF THE FRONTIER.
STOP!
YOU MUSTN'T LISTEN TO HIM, MARSHAL. I'M JUST THE FIRST GIRL HE EVER KNEW. HE'S MAKING UP STORIES.
YOU'RE SICK, MY BOY. HOW DO YOU FIGURE THIS TATTOO WOULD BE OF INTEREST TO ME?
BASTARD!
UH, IT'S NOT A TATTOO. THIS MARK IS INSCRIBED IN HER SKIN. HER BODY IS LIKE THE MEMORY OF OUR TERRITORY.
MOREOVER, HER NAME IS SHKODRA, LIKE THE TOWN.
YOU'LL PAY!
IF WE COULD STUDY THINGS EVEN CLOSER, OTHER SECRETS WOULD SURELY BE REVEALED.

SO THAT'S YOUR MATTER OF STATE SECURITY? A WRETCHED GIRL, A FOREIGNER WITH A BIRTHMARK ON HER ASS.
AND I HAD BIG PLANS FOR YOU. I WANTED TO ENTRUST YOU WITH LEADERSHIP OF THE CARTOGRAPHIC CENTRE. I'D EVEN THOUGHT OF HAVING YOU MARRY MY NIECE, A GIRL INFINITELY BETTER THAN YOUR NEO-VOLDACHIAN.
WELL, I ONLY HAVE MYSELF TO BLAME. I WAS WRONG TO THINK THAT CARTOGRAPHIC GENIUS COULD BE TRANSMITTED FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION.
YOU'RE LUCKY. IT'S NOT ONE OF MY HABITS TO HAVE THE SCIONS OF OUR DISTINGUISHED FAMILIES SHOT, HOWEVER DEGENERATE THEY MAY BE.
AS FOR YOUR TALES OF FRONTIERS, I FEAR YOU DON'T SENSE TO WHAT EXTENT THEY'RE ANACHRONISTIC. YOU'RE STILL STUCK AT THE WALL, AREN'T YOU? BUT OUR EMPIRE IS GROWING BY THE DAY: MYLOS, MUHKA AND BRUSEL ARE NOW PART OF IT.
TOMORROW, IT'LL BE GENOVA, PAHRY... PERHAPS CALVINI. ALREADY OTHER CITIES ARE ASKING TO JOIN US. THE FRONTIER IS MOVING CEASELESSLY. IT'S CHANGING SO FAST, IT'S BECOMING INVISIBLE.
AT THE CATOGRAPHIC CENTRE, IT'S GOING TO BE NECESSARY TO REDUCE THE SCALE TO INCLUDE ALL THE TERRITORY. THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN A GREAT RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOU, WOULDN'T IT? I'LL LEAVE YOU NOW, MY BOY. I'M EXPECTED IN GALATOGRAD.
AS FOR YOU, DJUNOV, YOU'D HAVE DONE BETTER TO HAVE NEVER LEFT THE CENTRE. YOUR MACHINES AWAIT YOU. I HOPE FOR YOUR SAKE THEY'LL BE WORKING SOON!

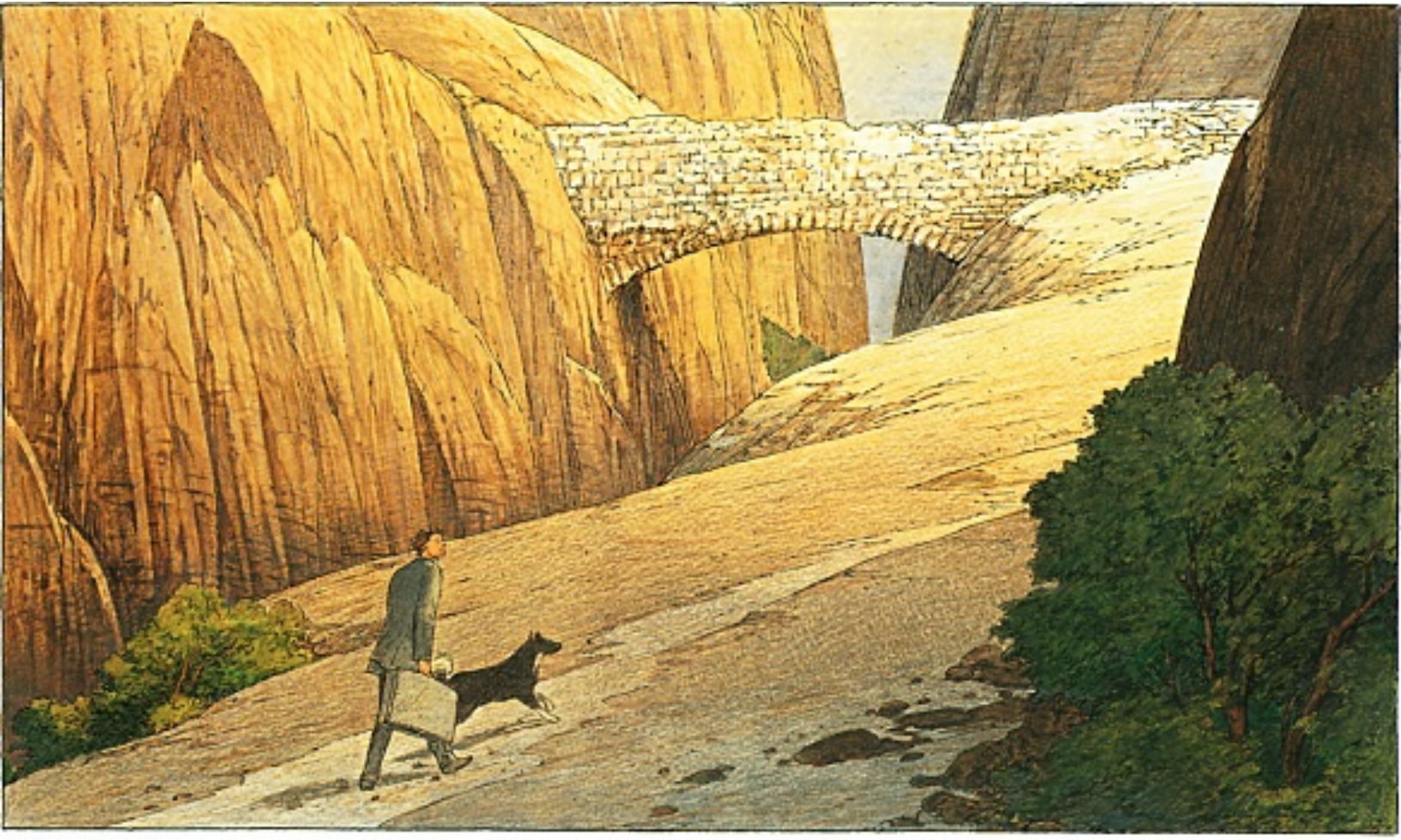

SHKODRA, I...
I'M REALLY SORRY.
SHUT UP!
THIS IS TOO BIG FOR US.
IT'S OVER, ROLAND.


WH... WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
COME WITH ME, MISS. YOU'LL RETURN TO THE CENTRE WITH ME. THERE'LL BE NO LACK OF WORK, BELIEVE ME!
SHE HASN'T DONE ANY-THING! LEAVE HER ALONE! IT'S ALL MY FAULT.
THAT'S ENOUGH, YOU! BE HAPPY TO HAVE GOTTEN OFF LIKE YOU DID!
I'LL GO WITH YOU, COLONEL.
POOR KALIN. THEY DID A NUMBER ON YOU.

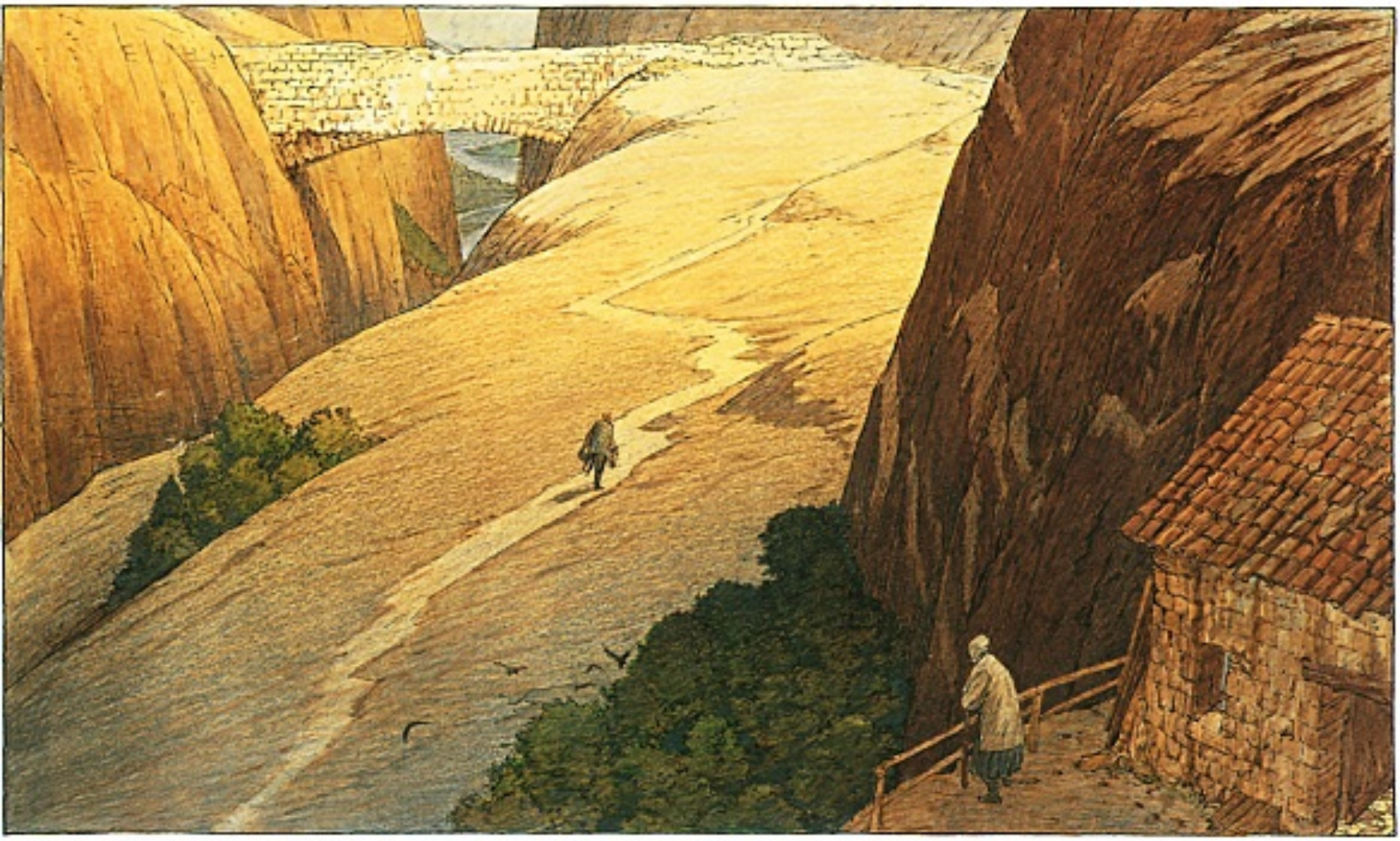
I'D SO, SO FOOLED MYSELF.

I'D DESTROYED MY CAREER, ENDANGERED MY FAMILY. AS FOR SHKODRA, IT WAS BETTER NOT TO THINK ABOUT IT.

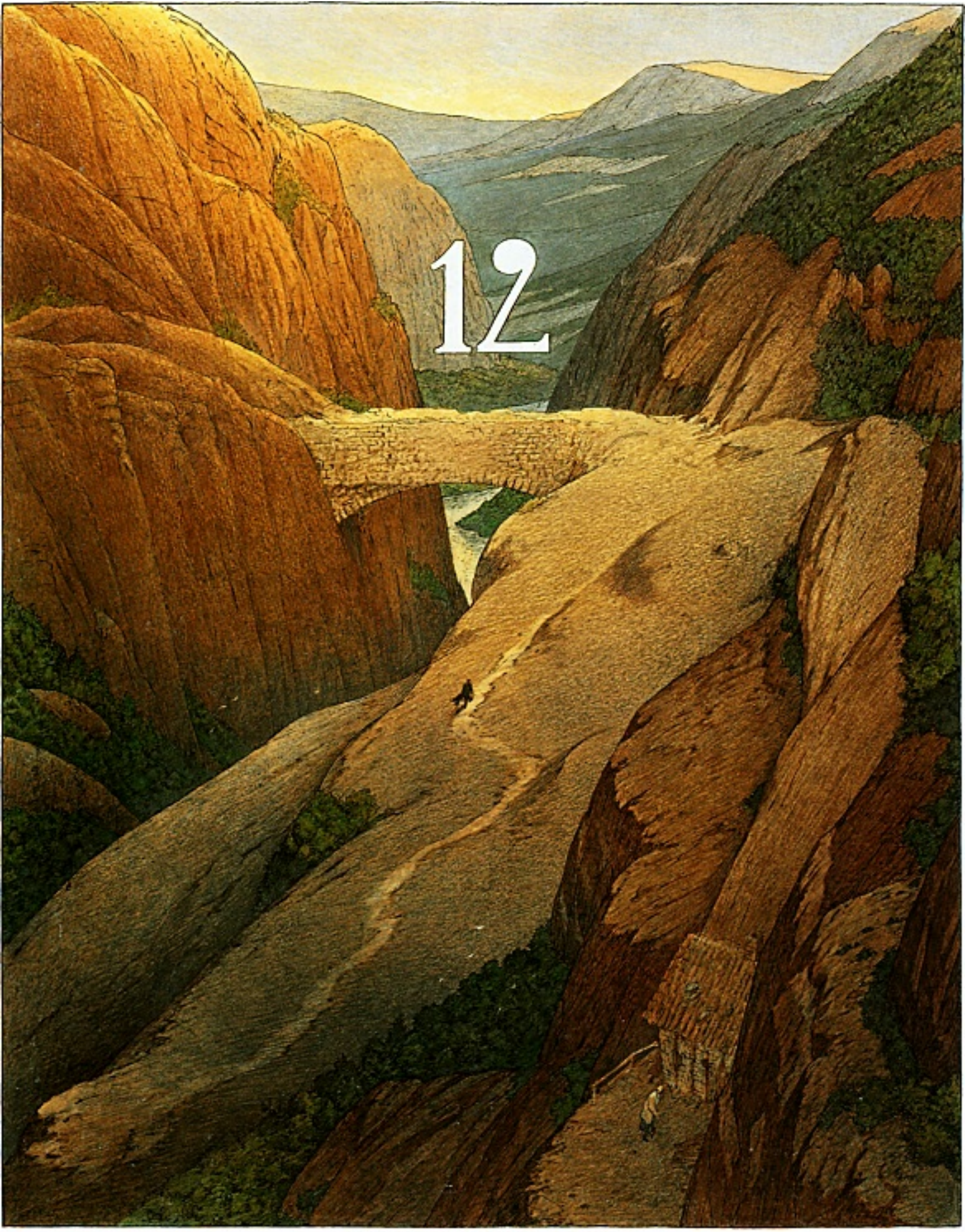
I'D BEEN A VICTIM OF THAT "CARTOGRAPHER'S PHANTASM" THEY'D SPOKEN OF AT RUPELMONDE WHICH I'D NEVER BELIEVED.



I'D LOST TOUCH WITH REALITY. I COULD ONLY SEE POINTS, LINES, MILEPOSTS, TRACES OF FRONTIERS.
I WAS WANDERING THROUGH LANDSCAPES, UNABLE TO ORIENT MYSELF.



I HAD TO LEARN EVERYTHING ANEW. LEARN ANEW HOW TO SEE. LEARN ANEW HOW TO OBSERVE.
ONE DAY, PERHAPS, I WOULD BECOME A CARTOGRAPHER.



SCHUITEN - PEETERS 2004

ISBN 3-937102-04-3